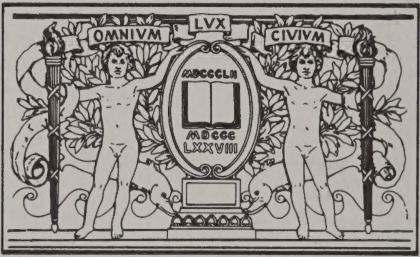
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GAY TAYLOR

NO GOODNESS IN THE WORM

HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY
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first edition

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Clown: You must think this, look you, that the worm will do his kind.
Cleopatra: Ay, ay; farewell.
Clown: Look you, the worm is not to be trusted but in the keeping of wise people; for, indeed, there is no goodness in the worm.

PART I: CHALK

THEY met in the road leading from the station. Both were wearing wide-brimmed summer hats, which made it impossible to exchange their usual salutation of a kiss. They stopped in the middle of the road, laughing at the absurd predicament, then simultaneously, with a grave Elizabethan gesture, they swept off their hats and embraced. Two old men traveling home to the midday meal with spades over their shoulders, gazed at them with that mild distrust that an animal will show for one of another species. And because they had just met and had immediately provoked criticism they felt excited and inclined to exaggerate their movements, in order to show how little consciousness of themselves they had. But of course they were tense, bristling, stuffed full of it; self-consciousness and the resentful bitterness of two civilized young women of twenty-five who had encountered a heavy check on their unbounded hopes of life.

Still, it was something to be together. In spite of the age and the civilization which they lived in and disliked, they couldn't help flushing and glowing merely because they had met, and because they thought each other charming. The August trees, the cornfields brimmed with orange corn, the very air had brightened. They stood apart, breathless, sparkling, almost lover-like.

"What a perfect morning," murmured Sikey, putting on her hat. She was a dark slender young woman with exquisite ankles and the bright witty glance of a bird. "In weather like this I don't so much mind being alive."

Valentine regarded her friend intently. "Sikey, how well you look. Are you in love?"

"Oh, love," said Sikey, shrugging. It was a commonplace between them that since the war men had become almost unendurable; they were spoilt, bored, irresponsible; virtue had gone out of them. And the two young women suffered from no feminist illusions. They knew and accepted without resentment the fact that women without men were incomplete creatures; what they resented was that the twentieth century or the war (they were never sure which) had given them a world of half-men to grow up among, half-men who mechanically aped emotions, or who, unable to bring contentment to one woman, would appease their own impotence or vanity by sniffing around among half a dozen or more, or who clung to breasts and skirts in the prolonged infantility of grown men unable to face the world that they had made.

Down the road they strolled in silence. The lower branch forked off to the village of Radnor End; they followed the upper; which continued between bleached banks alight with knapweed, scabious and yellow ragwort; now and again a patch of harebells would echo the lavender-blue of the August sky. To the south and west, beyond the village, lay the plain, veined with streams that were almost hidden in watercress beds, ripe with corn and orchards that covered the bones of the earth like sweet flesh. Across the chalk meadows to the east ran the long level line of the Culver Hills, rising as a cliff out of the quiet plain; tawny-tipped woods spread themselves along the hillsides like immense cats, basking in the sleepy radiance.

"Is Humphrey here?" asked Sikey at last. Her voice, like her step, was light and quick, and contrasted sharply with Valentine's brooding drawl.

"No, thank God, not till tonight."

The gate creaked. Their shoes rang on the brick path that led to the door of the cream-washed cottage, whose upper windows twinkled under the deep-browed thatch. The door stood open; in the hall was a table laid for lunch; the light splintered and shone where it fell on the glass and silver. It was a pleasant cottage: old furniture stood friendly and companionable beside modern, so that it looked neither like an antique dealer's shop nor a complete home sent down from Heal's; the stage was set for a pleasant life. But in spite of the comfortable chairs, the shelves of books, the modern woodcuts and the long carved Caroline chest, an uneasy spirit possessed the house. In its tidiness and in the very effacement of assertion and plan there was something conscious, something not at peace with itself. It was a mirror placed to catch the reflection of a harmony of life that had never been achieved.

"No," said Sikey, tossing off her hat and shaking out the dark curled hair with a bird's quick movement, "it isn't quite right, you know."

"I know," said Valentine. "Homes are born, not made. Of course this house can't keep a spirit of its own when it's simply a battleground for me and Humphrey. Come upstairs. I'll tell Lily to bring in lunch at once."

In the bedroom they lit cigarettes and sat for a few minutes on the window-sill, looking out at the line of wooded hills, stretched like a tightrope low on the eastern horizon, a mile or two beyond the garden hedge. Apples as red as signals gleamed among the curved leaves in the orchard below.

"Days like this reconcile one," Sikey admitted once more. "But on the whole, it's pretty bloody, isn't it? If you could have chosen, if they had said to you, 'Now this is what it's going to be like: will you be born, or not?' would you have said yes or no?"

"No, twenty million times no," said Valentine. With her fair coloring, she might have been one of Nature's dairymaids, but intelligence had sharpened the contours of her face and disillusion had given her the sulky mouth of a Cimabue angel.

Sikey got up, wriggled out of her town frock and into a light summer one in no more than two or three movements.

"How quick you are, darling," murmured the other girl tenderly. "What a pleasure you would be to a husband."

"Ah, that's the trouble," said Sikey. "I shall have to cultivate hooks and eyes and buttons and safety-pins. A woman whose clothes come off as easily as mine do is lost."

An impish grin formed for a moment on her face. The source of their dissatisfaction with life was the same, but she couldn't help regarding Valentine as still wrapped in the swaddling clothes of sentimentality, and she knew that Valentine couldn't help regarding her in her relations with men as rather a cold-blooded little sensualist. It was easier for them to agree that twentieth-century man was inadequate to twentieth-century woman, than to agree on any remedy or theory of conduct. But she took Valentine's hand and rubbed it against her cheek caressingly.

"Never mind, darling. This eternal need of discontent. If there weren't a worm at the core of life it would be necessary to invent one."

Arm in arm they went down to lunch.

The long summer day grew, widened, and was now closing its petals. The thud of falling apples in the grass had been the only sound in the orchard during most of the afternoon. Sikey lay reading in the hammock; Valentine in a deck-chair beside her was writing letters. They breathed each other's company as naturally as they breathed the air. But at last Valentine gathered up her things.

"We'd better go back to the house. *He'll* be down here by dinner-time."

"Did he know I was coming?"

"Yes."

"Did he mind?"

"Yes." Valentine suddenly rippled with laughter, but there was a bitter sound in it. "Oh, marriage, Sikey darling, marriage is ***uncomfortable.***" And she gave a little wriggle as though it were a frock too tight across the shoulders.

"Like the war, they say it's not so bad after the first seven years," suggested Sikey. "And if you don't intend to get out of it you might as well make up your mind to get used to it."

They strolled through the long grass back to the cottage. In the west were massed long clouds like bolsters, suffused with a faint pink bloom.

"You see," said Valentine, "I'm too weak to assimilate marriage and too obstinate to be assimilated by it. I ought to feel either stronger or weaker. As it is I just feel frustrated. Humphrey's weak too, of course. But then he's got the vilest tongue in the world, so that if ever he suffers he has a genius for passing it on."

They stood together for a moment in front of the doorway. The trees in the garden were heavy and brooding; from a field across the road came the rich dusty smell of the yellow rape.

"Oh, it's adorable," said Sikey.

In one of the armchairs in the hall reposed a hat and an evening paper.

"He's come, then," Valentine muttered gloomily. They went into the sitting-room, trying to be natural and keep the atmosphere unstrained so that Humphrey should not think they had been talking of him. But it was impossible to be natural when they knew how he loathed them together; his loathing jerked them out of their smooth-flowing silences and set them off twitching with flippancy and falseness. And when they were together Humphrey couldn't help constituting himself the custodian of all the conventions, of all moral values and all philosophical ideas: "all the paraphernalia that has always belonged to the Old Man of the Tribe," thought Valentine.

Humphrey came in. He looked at Sikey without pleasure. "How are you? I hear you're going to America." He sat down and opened his paper without waiting for a reply, stretching his long legs out in front of the fire as though to show them that he was at home in his own house and wasn't going to be put out in any of his comforts by a couple of maddening women. But God, how he hated them. Behind the evening paper he almost gritted his teeth with hatred. There they stood, easy, indifferent, with a bloom upon them like that of flowers, talking beside the piano, low so as not to disturb him, silencing their laughter so as not to irritate him. Yes, they were aware of him all right. But though they hushed their voices, he could feel the mockery through it all. With their swordlike wits they pierced beneath his poor defenses and his retaliatory dislike of women to the chilly center of his being, where in the place of calm male pride there reigned only fear. Humphrey did not dare to look into himself: he knew it would only be another blow to his weak courage. By now he was an aggrieved man. Every charming, talented, or successful person seemed a direct affront to himself. This evening he felt offended by the feeling of female conspiracy in the air, by Valentine's pleasure in her friend, by Sikey's loveliness, by the fact that she was going to America for several months on a university grant to study economic conditions, and the possibility that she might write a book which would cause her to be referred to as Miss Bertha Sykes, the brilliant young sociologist. So he stretched out his legs in a lordly way and read his paper and said nothing.

"Come and sing, Sikey. I've got some new Purcell," said Valentine.

The very tones of her voice were different when that other damned wench was here. There had been a time a few months back when all they would do was play foxtrots on the gramophone and practice new steps. That had annoyed him. Then Valentine took to spending the housekeeping money on symphonies and quartets; two or three records each; it became damned expensive. But now the wind had set in another quarter and they were reacting against machine-made music of every kind; the wireless and gramophone moldered. Still he felt annoyed. And the uneasy suspicion that he was unreasonable made him more annoyed than ever.

"No," said Sikey, "I won't sing just now." She came and sat down opposite him on the other side of the open hearth, showing off her lovely legs. He knew that she had lovers, and in his mind he cursed her and everything she represented, proud of his own imperviousness to female beauty.

"Well, Humphrey, how's the Anglo-Oriental?" Her voice was light and cool: why should he feel that every friendly enquiry held a jibe?

"Much as usual." And that was all he said.

After dinner the two girls took their coffee out into the garden. Small moons of convolvulus glimmered in the hedge, and a cockchafer rumbled across the lavender twilight. Dew was falling.

"Why do people marry?" exclaimed Valentine in the brooding voice that was so much darker than her appearance. She sat down in one of the white-painted garden chairs under a pear-tree, and stared across at Sikey. "Life oughtn't to be like this, I'm certain it oughtn't. I can't believe it's meant to have no meaning. I can't believe that decent reasonable affectionate human beings were meant to look on it as an absolutely worthless experience. After all, we haven't got instincts to no purpose at all. We're hungry, and somewhere in the world there is food: we're sleepy, and upstairs there are beds and pillows and mattresses. We want friends, and we're born into a world of people where it isn't impossible to find out our own kind. If we want God He has His house, or there are mystics and philosophers to read. Every desire we have is a path which leads to a goal somewhere. So I can't believe there's no answer to this question we're all asking; this desire for another person to help in making more sense of our lives than we can make of them alone."

Sikey gazed at the brooding face with its childish contours. "If you're sufficiently wrong together, it won't go on. One of you will have to leave the other."

"But, good God," and Valentine tugged her handkerchief into a knot and out again, "if ever I want to leave him he goes all soft and mushy, and says I mustn't let him down, whatever I do I mustn't let him down. He'd rather have me about the place, even to bully and turn into a neurotic weeping woman than have no one at all. I believe I make him feel more real to himself. Besides, you remember that time last year when I couldn't stand it and came away to you and Jane? Well, after a week or so I was just as wretched. We've got into the condition of half the married people in the world, unhappy together and miserable apart. I tell you, Sikey, I've cried more tears in these two years since my marriage than in all the rest of my life. You don't know what it's like, to feel you can be depended upon to dissolve in weeping before your husband has said three sentences to you in an angry voice. I simply despise myself, but I can't help it."

She got up, and walked restlessly to and fro over the grass. Above the Culver Hills the moon had risen like a luminous white plate, blackening the shadows and the woods, and covering the chalk downs with another layer of whiteness. A nightjar churred in the distance like a muffled alarm-clock.

"It's an odd thing," she went on, "to find out that you're married to your worst enemy. Before I was married, it seemed to me that men and women were two great hostile camps, with little private truces between isolated individuals, in which they were always a little treacherous to their own side. But now I don't feel that. I feel that every man in the world is more my friend than Humphrey."

She continued her restless pacing up and down, like a creature in a cage.

"And yet that's not true either. When I'm alone, the marvelous feelings still come back at times—you know, darling, those mornings when life seems a flower waiting to be picked. But the moment Humphrey's in the house, I feel frozen up, cut off from the whole world. And I believe that's how he likes me to feel. Of course he's a fool. He wants to separate me from everything so that I shall give myself to him alone, and yet he cuts me off from the sources of life so that I've nothing to give."

The grass was growing wetter; the roof of the cottage reared itself darkly into the whitening sky, washed over with moonlight.

"Hadn't we better be going in?" murmured Sikey uneasily. She thought Valentine looked very pretty as she walked up and down under the trees in the falling dew, but talk of this kind was stale, tiring and without issue. Up to a point Valentine was candid and communicative, but beyond that point she would not go and it was beyond that point that the seat of the trouble lay.

* * * * *

It was a rainy morning. Sikey had sailed for America; Humphrey was working in the offices of the Anglo-Oriental Travel Company in Southampton Row; Valentine was alone in the cottage below the downs. Humphrey's absence always gave her the feeling of an unexpected holiday at school; she resolved that she would be lazy, she would be naughty, she would go out to play. There were socks to be darned, through the heels of which you could drop a potato; there was the laundry to be sorted; in the larder there was a mountain of blackberries with a white snow-cap of sugar, waiting to be made into jam. But she did not care. Outside the wind blew, rain and sprays of Virginia creeper tapped at the windows, but indoors there was a fire and a book, and the colossal laziness that ate away her days was also a sort of revenge on the absent Humphrey who ate away her strength. The blood of generations of good housewives told her it was a sinful thing to lie in an easy chair by the fire, reading Marvell, at half-past eleven of a wet September morning, and in the middle of her furious and frustrated days that thought gave her some small satisfaction. It struck her that the mechanism, the equilibrium of her life and Humphrey's was exactly similar to that of the little wooden men and women whose movements in opposite directions in and out of their wooden house prophesy sun and rain. It was the condition of their existence and function that they should go opposite ways for ever, that any movement on the part of one meant a compensating and opposed movement on the part of the other.

"And that's so even in our interests," she reflected. "The moment I begin planting bulbs in the garden, Humphrey throws down his spade and rushes off. And if I caught him sitting about and reading Wiat and Marvell and Donne I should drop them like a red-hot iron."

It was curious, when one came to think of it, how little reverence or care they felt for the relation that had been between them. They treated it now like an old umbrella, to be tossed away among the lumber and brought back into use if needed. Their attitude was contemptuous, utilitarian, as if a mystery had never existed. Its beginning was wrapped in veils of antiquity as profound and obscure as those which hung over the beginning of man's life on earth, as hopeless to elucidate and as irrelevant to the buying and selling problems of everyday life.

Yet even now fragments of that dim time would creep back and come alive in her mind. It had never been a properly adult relation, a mature interchange between man and woman, it had been a bewildered alliance of two rather childish young people whose nerves were shaken by the war; a mutual propping association. How charming Humphrey had seemed two years ago, how incredibly boyish and charming, before he became a harassed and inefficient business man; before the fear of failure had eaten that cold hollow place in his heart. She would overhear him having long whimsical conversations with the kitten, when he came to call for her at the flat she shared with Jane and Sikey, and she had gone to put on her things. "No, really, I assure you, a cat whose whiskers meet under his chin *must* be mad." And, characteristically, they had taken refuge in a Little Language. Bitterly she remembered the observation of some modern wit, that a Little Language was a dangerous thing. Just how dangerous only the people with tenderness in their hearts could know. The ridiculous private names they had called each other.

"Hello, Bits."

"Hello, Snippets."

"Is that you, Mr. Pieces?"

And they had gone about on bus-tops and through the London parks, making up silly rhymes about each other:

There was a young woman called Snippets
Had an old-fashioned passion for tippets;
Said her lover—

No, she'd forgotten it, she wanted to have forgotten it, the childish rubbish that had left such a wry taste. Yet still they stirred, the old jingles they had invented with smiling minds:

There was a man whose name was Pieces
Was never able to find his leases,
But the worst of all his follies is
That he mislaid his fire-policies.

But now it was all dead, stupid, stale, like a two-year-old newspaper. She put some fresh logs on the smoldering hearth, brushing away the past as one would brush a crumb from one's knee. Then she crossed the room and stared at herself in the handsome Adam mirror. How young she looked, in spite of the weariness of life that clogged her veins. The blue eyes deepened; there was a lifting at the corners of the sullen mouth. So far her face showed no submission to the half-infantile half-sexed life to which Humphrey had condemned her. *Who will deliver me from the body of this death?*

Suddenly, involuntarily, the mirrored head lifted, the fair hair slid back, and the brooding mouth shaped itself to a kiss. Valentine, intensely astonished, blushed at herself and ran out of the room.

In the kitchen Lily was making pastry, her bare arms showing mottled and rough against the white flour; pans were simmering on the polished stove, and Minx, the cat, simmered contentedly below it.

"It's clearing, m'm."

In a rush of warmth, Valentine felt she could have hugged the brown-eyed devoted little woman who kept her home (so far as it was kept) together.

"Clearing? Yes. Lily, I'm going out, I'm going for a walk. I'm going over to Mrs. Namble's to get some honey. You might just cut me a few sandwiches. Don't bother about lunch."

The blessed ease, the exquisiteness of being able to dispose the Humphrey-less household as she wished: she felt as God must feel, winding up the universe and setting it down on the floor to spin like a Christmas toy. But oh, the immutable power the function of meals had when she was at home, fixed as stars in their courses and as unalterable by herself.

Ten minutes later she stepped out into a glittering world, where every tree dripped. The scent from the rape-field had been beaten back by the rain, but the guelder-rose bush, studded with flower-heads like big white nails, smelled heavenly sweet. Oh, God, the lovely world. She chose a muddy footpath that skirted the village and took her out into the southern plain through a field of bronzed barley, where the air flounced sibilantly in little rushing eddies. On a bank below a group of towering oaks she sat down to eat her sandwiches; the pale nipples of the acorns swayed in the dark leafage above her. For today it was her world; she lay on its breast and felt that she could kiss the grass and feel the life stirring in every leaf and blade. Now and again even the most clouded hours would dissolve into moods like this, when body became ecstasy and seemed spirit.

Presently she set out along the hedged roads, which were drying fast in the light wind. She felt rested and content, so long as she could turn her thoughts away from the blank wall of her marriage. Out in the plain most of the corn had been cut, and the fields were tented with shocks. It had been a gracious summer, golden and slow-ripening, as though the earth were entirely friendly to man. Valentine had felt her own life setting itself to the slow natural rhythm, as she idled her days away in the orchard or on the hill, but each evening Humphrey's return from town had brought it back to harshness and tenseness: and now, at the end of the summer, the spirit of harvest-time reminded her keenly that she was contravening the beat of Nature almost as much as if she were spinning round violently in her own little orbit to an impudent jazz rhythm. Yet, did she want a child? And pat came the answer, given by her blood even before her brain: "Not Humphrey's child."

She swung open the gate of the cottage. The arch of sweetbriar spattered her coat with a fall of raindrops. Into the cottage she ran, without knocking.

"Namkin, my love."

Mrs. Namble, a stout village woman with hazel eyes of surprising loveliness, looked up from the shirt she was ironing.

"Oh, it's you, me dear. Come and sit down."

She drew a basket-chair closer to the fire, which was blocked up with irons. Above it the mantelpiece was draped in a white lace curtain, caught up at intervals with artificial rosebuds. On the wall hung a portrait of the Prince of Wales and a grocer's calendar which showed a full-bosomed and insipid lady adorning her hair with a carnation. Valentine sat down, and she picked up the iron, holding it against her cheek.

"Well, Miss Valentine, what's your news?"

"I've been reading a curious book," said Valentine. "It tells you how to know the sex of your babies before they're born."

Mrs. Namble gave three or four bangs at the shirt on the table before she put down the iron on a rusty two-pound weight that lay ready for it, and turned to her visitor.

"Rubbish, me dear, just rubbish. How can they tell? They can't. Why, you're never twice alike, nor in your mind nor in your way of eating."

She sat down in the chair opposite, tucked up her skirt and folded it over her knee.

"I'll tell you this, me dear, when I was carrying my Susie, I couldn't touch nothing, not a bite, it wouldn't stay on me stomach. Me poor old man, he used to fetch me a quart of stout from the public twice a week, and not much of that I hadn't, neither. I was that miserable—turned me face away and hadn't a word for nobody. But when my Alice was on the way, why, I was a different woman. Beer, sausages, bread and cheese, I was always at it. Had me pint of stout with me dinner and wouldn't ask you to so much as look at it. I made sure it was going to be a boy. But no. Don't you believe it, me dear; they can't tell, not they."

She got up, stumped down her iron, and began to dash it over the shirt she had not yet finished.

"It must be a nasty job," said Valentine thoughtfully. "A job one would need very good reasons for taking on."

Mrs. Namble gave her a cunning look. "Worse than you know, me dear. You just wait. Why, how long've you bin married?"

"Two years; three next June," admitted the girl.

"Well, you're one of the lucky ones, you are," said she, puffing over her ironing. "And how's Mr. Spens?"

"All right, I think."

Mrs. Namble guffawed. "Better since Miss Sikey went to America, I'll reckon. Goodness gracious me, these men. What 'ud he say to you, I wonder, if—" She stopped, and held up the shirt she had just finished. "There, isn't that lovely now? That's a beautiful piece of linen for you."

Perfunctorily Valentine glanced at it. "Whose is it, Namkin? Why doesn't he wear a collar and tie?"

"Likes to show his bonny throat, bless him." There was an odd brightness in the hazel eyes, and Valentine was conscious of a heavy weight upon herself, forbidding her to ask the inquisitive questions that would have been so natural. She sat still and wary, looking into the fire. Mrs. Namble said no more, but continued her ironing. In the close little room a silence gathered, broken only by the fire sinking in the grate, and the occasional fall of a cinder.

"Staying to tea, lovey?" she asked after a while.

"I'd like to," said Valentine. "There's such peace here."

A crow of laughter burst from Mrs. Namble. "What, an't you got peace in your own home? What time does your man get back?"

"About seven. I ought to be back before that; he's always so annoyed if I'm not in when he comes home."

The stout woman cleared the table, spread a cloth, and laid it with heavy white china.

"Pity you're not going up Heron Hill way, Miss Valentine," she said, peering slyly at the girl across the steam of the kettle as she made the tea. "You might ha' told Mr. Merryweather that his washing was ready whenever he cared to pop along for it."

"Who's Mr. Merryweather?" said Valentine, frowning.

"Him as wears the open shirts. He's living along in that little bungalow on Heron Hill. Going to make furniture up there, he says he is. Looking out for a workshop and a couple of men and then he'll start. Some beautiful drawings he's showed me. Oh, he's a real clever gentleman, is Mr. Merryweather."

The girl gazed broodingly into the fire. A flush had invaded her cheeks; it was so ridiculous, so reasonless, that she turned from Mrs. Namble to hide her sudden confusion. Her whole body felt taut as a fiddle-string. She began to talk rapidly about the gossip of Radnor End.

"Mrs. Nasher's idiot boy tried to push one of the village children into the pond last week. His mother is terrified that they'll take him away from her. Half the village swears he's a harmless innocent, and the other half swears he's a criminal lunatic. Poor wretched Mrs. Nasher. . . . And did you hear that the Rector's found some Roman remains in his kitchen-garden? But it's breaking his heart that he'll have to dig up all his lovely globe-artichokes. He came over to see us on Sunday with a Roman brick under his arm."

So the afternoon passed. Tea had been cleared away and Mrs. Namble had set to work on a second linen shirt when a knock was heard and she was obliged to leave it and go to the door. Valentine lay back in her chair, smoking. The conversation at the door seemed to be lasting a long time. Twice an impulse rose in her to get up and examine the garment on the table; twice she beat it back. Stronger than ever, it returned. With a movement almost of anger, she threw away her cigarette and went to the table. Yes, the linen was strangely white and fine. "What an affectation," she thought, looking at the collar and the open neck. She picked up the iron, hesitated, and then set to work to finish the shirt. It seemed alive under her fingers, like skin; her flushed cheeks kindled to scarlet. Murmurs at the outer door still continued, so she hung the garment over a chair to air, and stood staring out of the window. The line of the Culvers looked dark and far-off, but she could dimly see the bold contour of Heron Hill as its shoulder emerged out of the plain. Apprehensions flickered in her heart.

At last Mrs. Namble came bustling back into the room. "There, that's a nice little bit of work for me. Mrs. Sanders over at The Croft, she's six months gone now, and she wants me to alter some of her dresses. Well, every little helps."

Valentine put on her hat and waterproof. "Namkin, I must go. Get me the honey, my love; that was my only excuse for coming." An acute anxiety had seized her lest Mrs. Namble should realize that she had left the ironing unfinished and had returned to find it done, and not until she was out under the clear after-rain skies on her road home did the tension slacken.

She arrived home late, to find Humphrey fuming in the sitting-room.

"Where the hell have you been? After all, when I'm out all day you might at least have the consideration . . . what you do with yourself I can't think . . . never a thing can you see to in the house . . . if it's all too much trouble I wish to God you'd take yourself off."

She looked at him steadily, though her heart began to throb. "I'm sorry I'm an inefficient housekeeper, Humphrey. The fact is, it's very difficult to be efficient if you're bored. And I'm bored, deadly bored. Our life here is awful. We just swing about in fits of antagonism; there's nothing real between us at all; we've struck no roots. Haven't I asked you a thousand times to let me go back to London and get a job? But you feel frustrated, and you want to see me frustrated as well."

The memory of past days of simple happiness with Jane and Sikey overcame her, and tears crept into her eyes. Humphrey stood with his back to her, a tall black cloud blotting out life; a frustrate man, determined to involve her in his own predicament.

"Why must you always start this bloody business of talking things over?" he flung at her across his shoulder. "What good has it ever done us? It never gets us any further; damned womanish business, talking things over. Why can't you settle down to life and learn to discipline yourself like other people?"

Tears began to rain down her cheeks. "How can I settle down to life if it doesn't seem real to me? What is there to settle down to? Nobody can 'settle down' unless there's a basis to settle on. This life here has no value to me while I feel so unhappy inside."

"Unhappy?" shouted Humphrey, irate and frightened. "You've never been so happy in your life. You simply want to grumble because it adds to your self-importance."

Oh, how deep the antagonism ran, how woundingly deep; it cut down to the very core of their lives. What did it matter what words they said and what grounds they chose to quarrel on? That was nothing, nothing at all. But between them was the blade of a new kind of sex-hatred, in which the man, having lost his native faith and pride, rebelled against the knowledge that he was unequal to life, and loathed his woman because of his haunting suspicion that she was at least as good a man as he; while she moved round in a frustrate antagonized circle, possessed of neither the deep self-abandonment of the fulfilled female, nor the bright hard half-male capacity of a woman compelled by circumstance to rely on herself alone. The dissatisfaction was deep as life itself, for the age-old equilibrium between male and female was lacking.

Lily announced dinner, and they went into the hall. An oil-stove stood near the table, making a pattern of soft-woven light and shade on the ceiling; candles beamed upon the polished surface. The garden door was open; night was lying over the earth outside like a deep blue cup. Valentine served the vegetables mechanically at her end of the table, drawn into that pool of brooding quiet which any contact with the natural world unfailingly gave her. Soon the winter nights would come, with Orion high in the sky, and the red gleam of Aldebaran, and the dead coned leaves of the hornbeam rattling in the garden-hedge; and with the winter, perhaps the beginning of peace would come as well. For the turning seasons still lured her with continual hope that their change in rhythm and texture might communicate itself to her own defaced existence.

"Blair coming in tonight?" said Humphrey presently. Was it a fairly graceless sort of olive-branch? She felt quieter now than in the sitting-room a little while before, but not quieter to him; there was a bad-tempered droop to his mouth and to his shoulders, nothing of him that did not warn her against the pursuit of dangerous subjects.

"I asked you if Blair was coming in?" he repeated irritably. These were the innocent-looking dangers that enmeshed her; a pause too long, a word too much emphasized, and immediately he might be convulsed with rage because she had not meekly allied herself with him in ignoring the ashy fabric of their life.

He glared at her across the table, but his challenge had the effect of breathing courage into her.

"What's the use of pretending, Hump?" she said reasonably. "What does it matter if Blair is or isn't coming, while there's all this wrongness between you and me? It really isn't possible to go on ignoring it for ever. Even if you are, I'm not willing to."

Laying down his knife and fork, he looked at her, sullen, mask-like behind the candles. "Well, what is it this time? Do you want to go to London and get a job? Do you want to go and live with Jane?" His heavy, clouded face suddenly broke into a grin. "Or is it a lover you want? Upon my soul that mightn't be a bad plan. Well, take a lover and stop complaining. I shouldn't mind having a mistress myself."

The idea illumined him, brought nearer that lost young man she had married centuries back. "Why not? We're both free; we needn't enslave ourselves. Do as you like, I don't care. Only don't be aggrieved if I do as *I* like."

She could not resist the feeling that she watched a child playing with explosives. What was the matter with his sense of reality? Certainly he felt himself unfitted to be a business man; upstairs in the attic were the first chapters of a novel and some poems in a big manila envelope, full of all the faults and fire of young idealism but entombed (she knew he fancied) by the fact of his marriage. What a couple of ungenerous distributors of blame they were! He held her responsible because the novel lay unfinished and because he found his work at the Anglo-Oriental uninteresting; she looked bitterly upon him because her reason for living had petered out since marriage. Yet what had it been before? Only that vital sense of delight mingled with anticipation that beats so strongly in the blood of youth and needs no argument to enforce it.

"You see," said Robert Blair, his head bent over the table as he searched the pockets of his loose tweed coat, "these tesserae are obviously part of a mosaic pavement. The super-structure seems to have disappeared—it's probably been utilized for building: we've found a few fragments of large pantiles from the roof, but I expect most of it has been thieved by the villagers long ago."

He set out half a dozen little brownish-red stumps on Humphrey's evening paper, and looked upon them with pride.

"There's simply no limit to what we may find."

"Tell me . . ." said Humphrey.

Valentine went away, threw on her coat and walked out of the house. They would have tussled through the conversational possibilities of the excavations in the Rectory garden, the latest book on Russia, the derivations of modern architecture, and heaven alone knew what else, while she strolled in the moonlight to the foot of the hills and back again. They got on extremely well, Humphrey and Blair; between them existed the ideally impersonal relationship in which Humphrey felt at home. At the moment she was almost inclined to think he was right. The trouble with personal relations is that they are so personal. The state of Russia or of modern architecture is not food for them to thrive upon. Pictorial imagination ran ahead, envisaged their own personal relation as a half-starved chicken which Humphrey was remorselessly trying to stuff with objective facts: the chicken made a sickened face and spat them out.

Under her feet crunched the loose flints of the chalky road: the line of the Culver Hills towered above her. Out into the plain humped the three successive shoulders: Radnor Hill, Heron Hill, Pilgrim Beacon. Radnor Hill was black with secret woods; Heron Hill bore a small crop of thorn and juniper bushes like warts and whiskers; Pilgrim Hill stood out bare and bold to the south. A profound curiosity stirred her as she gazed: already the dweller on Heron Hill was taking up his habitation in her consciousness. It would not be long before Mrs. Namble saw her again.

* * * * *

"Well, don't forget our agreement," said Humphrey amiably as he packed his suitcase; he was going to stay for a few nights with a friend in town. Valentine, sitting on the window-sill, looked out into the garden. Late September had turned generous and was heaping up a golden store of summer against the dark days to come. How white the chairs were gleaming under the apple-trees on the lawn.

"What agreement?"

He looked straightly at her averted head, but she went on looking out of the window. "What I said to you the other night. About our freedom, in fact."

At that she turned round, laughing. "Hump, you're a preposterous theorist. How would you like it if I took you at your word? Or are you preparing to confess that you have a paramour?"

The packing was rather hastily resumed. "Nonsense. But what I mean is, we're free, aren't we? That's the understanding."

"Words, words, words," thought Valentine. "Freedom is an idea with no meaning. *Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains.* What a lie, what a treacherous, misleading lie." Aloud she betrayed herself into an absurdity. "When people begin to care more for freedom than for love, there's not much love left between them."

"Well, I suppose there's not much love left between us," said Humphrey. He spoke abstractedly, as though thinking aloud. "I must say I prefer a woman who's got some sort of allure."

She drew in her breath. That, then, was his interpretation of the thing that was wrong between them. Humphrey, the cold, the fearful, the unloving, was putting their failure upon her, on the very grounds she could least endure. Passively she accepted his good-by kiss on her brow; his steps rang out on the wooden stairs and down the brick path. Secure in his own self-assurance, he had no inkling of what he had done. For a long while she sat shivering on the sill. Was that the trouble, then? Was she simply a creature who could not evoke desire? Every pulse of her body throbbed with pain and violation. It was as though in that one slow half-conscious statement he had insulted her whole being, the virginity she had yielded to him, the deep secret female core of her that slept in her breasts and her womb. Their life together was no longer possible. But still she could not see what was necessary to be done. Die, perhaps? For a while she allowed the thought to cradle her tired body and exasperated nerves, but when the next thought came, of how it was to be accomplished, nothing in her was prepared.

Miserable and utterly confused, she went downstairs. Lily had taken the afternoon off; the cottage was empty. Some link with humanity she felt she must have. The telephone, discreet and shining on its perch in the hall, gave her an idea, and she put through a trunk call to London. Presently the bell pealed.

"Are you Radnor End 19?"

"Yes."

"Hold on, please. Your call to London."

At last, after endless stabbings and gruntings, the voice of Jane.

"Hello, Jane. Could you come down? Humphrey's gone to town for the week-end."

Jane, gentle, reasonable, murmured hesitation.

"Oh, Jane, do come. It's all so ghastly."

"So what?"

"Ghastly, I said, ghastly. Well, never mind. Come down, can't you?"

Gently Jane considered. "I can't come today. But I could come tomorrow. Yes, I'll come for the day. Can you meet me? All right, half-past eleven. Yes, I will. Good-by, darling."

Well, that was settled. But she felt still as blank as before. Outside was the golden day, pure and rounded as a bubble, and hardly a leaf yet fallen from the trees. Mrs. Namble's? Already she had been there twice within a week; a third time would make her visits seem disproportionate, unbalanced. But half an hour later she was walking through the village, its chestnut trees tawny, its clustering elms flecked with amber, and out through the pale reaped fields to the cottage near the watercress stream.

No one was in, although the door stood ajar. Tea was laid for two on one end of the kitchen table, but there was no clew to their identity. Valentine sat down in the basket-chair, lit a cigarette, and waited. How delightfully trusting of Mrs. Namble to leave her door open and the table laid for tea. The quiet cottage and the autumn afternoon lapped her round like a deep bath of peace. She lay back in the armchair, utterly relaxed; presently the cigarette dropped from her fingers; a moment more and she would fall asleep.

But in the very second when unconsciousness was closing like waters over her head, there came a knock at the outer door. Valentine sat upright, suddenly flushed. A knock at the door of an empty house gives back a different sound from that given if the house is inhabited, even temporarily and by a stranger. Whoever it was, if he had any sensibility, must know from the round completed sound that some one was there; his knock had not the hollow hopeless tone of the deserted dwelling.

Still she waited, breathless. Twice the knock was repeated. The time had come; she dare wait no longer. Flushed with drowsiness and expectation she went to the door. On the step stood a slight dark man with a knapsack over one shoulder. His glance was bright, alert and untrusting, like that of a woodland creature, a wren, a field-mouse or a squirrel. They stood in silence while the seconds passed, bending their eyes and senses towards mutual comprehension.

"I know who you are," said Valentine at last, "your name's Merryweather. I ironed your shirt last week."

"You?" he said. "Mrs. Namble didn't tell me that."

"She didn't know," Valentine murmured, laughing a little. The air was stealthy with a charm that hung between them, which speech seemed, if not to shatter, at least a little to impair. Besides, his voice faintly disappointed her; it lacked body and was pitched half a tone too high. Neither was it a cultivated voice.

His dark secretive gaze sought hers. "I've got to hear about this. I know your name too—you're Mrs. Spens—Miss Valentine *she* calls you." He jerked his head towards the cottage. "Where is she, do you know?"

"I've no idea. She seems to have gone out and left the cottage to itself."

"And to us," he said. "Do you think I might come in?"

"Of course." She stood aside to let him pass. "Was she expecting you to tea?" They went into the inner room together.

"I said I might look in," he answered, sitting down by the window. It was set towards the outside of the old wall, and a broad sill bore pots of geranium and maidenhair fern. Outside were the shadows and the dust, and the late year simulating summer. Silent again, they contemplated one another. On the formal level their intercourse was easy, but the deeps beneath were astir with disquiet. He seemed to her to have an animal's grace and an animal's aloofness; an animal's self-absorption he had too, quiet and deep, and quite unlike the restless tearing introspection of her own generation. She realized that he must be many years older than herself, in spite of his timeless look. As though against the rushing minutes, her mind raced to accomplish its circle of understanding. Quick, while there's time; observe him, analyze him, see what he is. But still he sat negligent and graceful beside the window, watching her in his withdrawn way.

"How did it come about that you ironed my shirt?" New color burned in her cheeks as she said calmly, "Mrs. Namble left it on the table when she went to the door one day when I was here, and as I got bored with waiting I finished it for her. You're living up on Heron Hill, she tells me."

He uncrossed his legs and leant forward, lit and eager. "Yes, I've taken a bungalow up there. When I can get a barn and a couple of workmen I'm going to start making furniture. It's rare fine country up in the Culvers, don't you agree? God, when I wake up in the morning and look out at the clearing and the plain as blue as smoke at the bottom of the hills, and all the jolly day to do nothing but enjoy it, why, I could sing all day at the top of my voice, it's so good to be alive."

She gave him her slow, brooding glance. "Do you really feel like that? You're very enviable. But you must remember I live down in the plain, so I can't share your point of view."

"Come up and see my house," he said. An urge, an excitement, had gathered in his voice; it beat at her heart and communicated itself to her. Her lids drooped.

"I should like to. When shall I come?"

Rising, he faced her. The little room befriended their mood, walled in their thoughts and spun a web of exquisite confusion about them.

"Come tomorrow." How deeply kindled were his eyes. She moved abruptly, and raked out the smoldering fire, fearing that if she stayed motionless he would catch her in his arms.

"I can't," she said, matter-of-fact. "I've got a friend coming down for the day. But won't you come and see my house? It's not curious like yours. Still, come to supper."

"May I?"

Oh, the look of him, that warm lit life that stirred in his hands, in his eyes, that beat in the pulse below his lovely throat. She felt dazed and lost. A weight was hanging upon her spirit, dragging it down into a sleepy sensual darkness she had never known, and now feared, and longed for.

"It's nearly five o'clock," she said in a strained voice. "Do you think she's ever coming back? And if not, do you think we dare make some tea?"

"Yes, let's make tea." He took down the old brown teapot from the mantelpiece and poured some water into it from the sooty kettle that purred upon the hob. "Shall I make it, or will you? You're sure she won't mind?"

"She won't mind; she's a darling."

"Yes, she's a darling," he agreed, gazing at her with the warming teapot in his hands. "An absolute darling," he repeated. And the glow in his face told that she and not Mrs. Namble was in his mind. Presently they were sitting down to tea and Valentine was pouring out and asking him how he managed his life up on the hilltop.

"I've not been there in the winter yet, so I don't know, but at present it's easy. They take in bread for me at the pub, and anything I want delivered, and I get milk and eggs from the farm. And now and then I walk along the hills and down to Radnor End with a knapsack."

"How awful," she said. "I'm sure you live on tinned food and never see a cut from the joint and two vegetables from one week to another. You must come down and have lunch with me when you get hungry. I'm always alone."

Again the dark secretive gaze fastened on her. "Always alone, are you? How's that?"

"Well, my husband goes up to town. But of course one's alone inside always, all the time. That's how life is. We all walk by ourselves; if we're companioned it's only by creatures of our own imagination."

"You mean, for instance, that if you and I were walking through the woods on Radnor Hill together now, we should still be as alone as if I were in my house and you in yours?"

"How can I tell?" she whispered, flushing. But the kisses he burned to give her were defeated by Mrs. Namble's return at that moment. She walked briskly through into the inner room. A subtle look dawned in her beautiful eyes as she saw them sitting together.

"Namkin, darling," said Valentine, scrambling up, "say you don't mind. We waited so long, and there was the table laid and everything inviting us to tea. Was it very dreadful of us to make ourselves at home?"

Mrs. Namble took off her hat and coat, still with the subtle look haunting her face. "No, lovey, no, I'm pleased, I'm real pleased you did. Now give me a cup of tea, Miss Valentine, for I'm wanting it badly." She sat down heavily in the basket-chair and began to unbutton her boots. "We've been arranging about the outing for the Women's Institute. I walked across to Radnor End for the meeting. Pretty nigh the end of the season now it is, so we must get it in next week. We're to go over to Windsor in a cherrybang. Not that I care much for Windsor Castle, I've bin there before; it's all statutes and revolting tables, but still it's the outing and the fresh air more than what you see, I reckon. Well, Mr. Merryweather, and how're you getting along up there in your lonely house? Gracious me, I wouldn't live up there if you paid me."

He smiled at her, a shy charming smile that melted Valentine's heart towards him. "Oh, I'm getting along, getting along, you know. But if it weren't for you and your cottage and your kindness to me, I'd have run away long ago."

"I made you a cake," she told him. "I'll get it and wrap it up. You walking back with Miss Valentine?"

"Oh, but surely that's a long way round," cut in the girl. "The footpath up to Heron Hill is much nearer than walking round by the village."

"There's my shopping," he suggested with a teasing humility. "So if you wouldn't mind my walking back with you . . ."

But out in the road they were shy. Talk flickered up and died down again as they walked along in the summer-scented evening. The empty fields on either side of the road had a drained and pallid look under the gold sky; the woods on the hillside hung heavy; groups of mounded trees gloomed over the white turf. And they fell silent, linked in spirit with the drowsy fruition of the year. Words were of little avail, and became irrelevant when they could hold such intimate communion with their eyes.

At the gate of her own home Valentine paused to meet again the dark secretive look. "You're coming tomorrow, then?"

Out of his secrecy and animal imperviousness he peered at her. "Indeed I am. Good-by, Miss Valentine." His tone teased her and set her blood aflame.

"Good night," she said, and hesitated.

"Francis," he murmured.

"Good night, Francis."

She leaned against the gate like a village woman and watched him lope off down the road. A golden haze had come down over her mental landscape, and some dimly prophetic part of her mind recognized that it would not lift, nor Francis Merryweather be perceived as other human beings perceived him, until the whole drama of their relationship was nearing its close.

* * * * *

Jane Napier, gentle and serene as a nun, lay back in a corner of the railway carriage and watched the autumn country flying past behind the telegraph poles and wondered what crisis this particular Sunday morning might divulge for her advice. The last fortnight since Sikey had left England had been dull and a little depressing. To her friends it seemed less a malign than a benevolent Providence that had so far kept Jane unmarried, in spite of her almost superhuman suitability for wifehood. There was something moving and perhaps a little suggestive of patient Griselda about her in her pure absence of initiative: she was incarnate antistrophe, the perfect rejoinder. But the lead had to be given her. A question or a problem posed, and her mind moved about it, mild yet perfectly clear in its direction, but by herself she was as empty of volition as a musical instrument left untouched. However, it rarely happened that she remained in isolation for more than a few days, for Sikey and Valentine were a stormy couple, prolific of crises, which she was for ever called upon to adjust or advise on. For years now she had been the perfect secretary to a harassed publisher in Gower Street; her childhood's love had been killed in the war, and no one else had ever succeeded in fluttering the heart of gentle Jane.

So now she sat in her corner, a soft meditative little person, with cloudy hair and eyes: the *Observer* lay unfolded on her lap. Did Valentine want to leave Humphrey again? What a mystery an unhappy marriage was, and how desperately two people clung together when it was pointed out to them that they would be better apart, as though sheer clinging could make them one. The world had become maddened and diseased by the fear of loneliness and the fear of being imposed upon; it lacked the strength to stay quietly separate and it had lost the faith by which to accept and live at peace with another human. Poor Valentine; poor Humphrey. And as for Sikey, she hardly knew what to think. From her bag she pulled out a letter from New York, written in Sikey's erratic hand.

> *Jane, I refuse to form one half of that clumsy quadruped, a married couple. "I hate two minds that breathe but one desire." I told him so. I said I was willing to share bed but not board. The situation is very tense. I shall go away soon. The fact is, it's all equally tiresome, chastity and unchastity, getting married and not getting married, husbands and lovers, unbridled propagation and indiarubber sacrifices to the Cyprian. Sometimes I think I shall get me to a nunnery, just as a demonstration of disgust with the universe. In the meantime, I must work. My sweet and chaste and lovely Jane, don't remember evil against me.*

That meant, presumably, another lover, thought Jane as she folded up the letter. Of course Sikey would laugh and fling back her dark head in bravado and quote her particular poet:

And so I hope, since my first hope is gone,
To find in many what I lost in one,

and of course the lasciviousness with which she took her gallant affairs was salted, if not sweetened, by a disinfecting sort of humor, but all the same, between Sikey's promiscuity and Valentine's fretful monogamy Jane was at a loss to arbitrate.

The little stations slid by. At last, Radnor End. It was a dull morning, burdened with plum-colored clouds. The enamel advertisements of cough-cures, soap, seeds and oil-engines looked crude in their garish reds and yellows. Valentine, bare-headed, the collar of her raincoat turned up in the Medici fashion of neckwear, strolled down the platform.

"Jane, my love. Isn't it cold? The summer's gone since last night. I believe we shall have rain."

It was all a little bewildering. Yesterday a despairing cry for help over the telephone; today this blooming young creature that looked as though care had never fretted her mind. Jane counseled patience to herself, watched, and talked of Sikey.

"The darling fool," said Valentine. A softness had come into her brooding voice. "I wish she wrote to me. We never do write, you know. Of course she knows I think she ought not to have so many men. I'm always afraid she'll destroy something in herself."

"Her argument is that she doesn't give anything of value in these affairs so nothing can possibly be damaged. Specious, I think," said Jane.

"I think so too. The point is that she's destroying her capacity for love. And even if you imagine there's not a man left in the world worth loving, you can't be sure." Valentine was suddenly as red as a berry.

But at the end of the day Jane was no nearer learning why she had been summoned down. "Do you realize," she said at last, "that I've got to catch the six o'clock train? Budge is coming to dinner at the flat."

Valentine was excited and dismayed. "Oh, Jane, you can't go, you can't leave me alone. I was certain you'd stay till the late train. No, Jane, you can't go." She came over and sat on the arm of Jane's chair and stroked her neck. "Darling, do stay."

Jane leaned back against the cushions. "What is it, Valentine? Mightn't you just as well tell me? Why were you wretched yesterday and aren't today?"

The other girl got up and walked up and down the room. "I'm just a fool, Jane, an unbalanced fool. Don't ask me, don't ask me anything. If you won't stay till the late train there's nothing I can tell you."

"Tell me how Humphrey is, then."

"Oh, he's got a new bee. The fact is, Humphrey and I have never respected the relation between us. From the beginning it didn't work, and instead of being patient we just kicked and swore at it, as though that would set a delicate bit of mechanism to rights. Well, it's breaking down, and as it never was any use, why shed tears?"

"Still, you're married," said Jane. "And you loved each other once. That's a tie, you know."

Valentine shook back her fair hair. "I refuse to feel tied if Humphrey doesn't. But the truth is that Humphrey hates women. Not of course on the surface. Except for people who infuriate him, like Sikey, he can usually manage to get on quite well with them, on a tinkling surface level. But hate of the female is really the deepest thing in his being. No wonder, when he was brought up by such a mother and such sisters."

She paused, thinking of Alicia and Mabel Spens, and the mother with her white shrewish face. To her mind the Spens family were a little clan bound together by the steel chain of property-conservation. The battle for property-conservation preserved their toughness, and their toughness preserved their property. They were harsh and hard and raw, like a tribe perpetually at war which has no time to develop the more civilized qualities of tenderness, sympathy and subtle understanding. Humphrey, with his spurts of sensibility, had succeeded in being neither a Spens nor a sensitive; neither flesh nor fowl nor good red herring. He shared the family characteristics of bad manners and harsh speech, but he had already lost most of his money in one hare-brained scheme after another, in a most un-Spens-like way. And so for years now he had been taking his revenge in attacks on women. Women were greedy, grasping, selfish; women were mean and ungenerous; women were one and all avid for wealthy husbands and senseless luxury; women betrayed every fine issue throughout the whole civilized world. His first contact with a circle of young women who earned their own living with some pride and were utterly indifferent concerning wealthy husbands shattered his theories and even for a while his Spens attitude of distrust. In those few months of an open-heartedness and enthusiasm quite foreign to him, he had fallen wildly in love with Valentine. Marriage followed, and a reassertion of the native Spensness followed that. Fortunately his harsh distrustful family lived remote in their cold stone house set in its acres of Durham moorland, and rarely troubled them.

"It's interesting, isn't it?" Valentine continued aloud. "If you put the thing in a nutshell, it is that we believe personal relations are the most important matters in life, and for a time Humphrey has been going after strange gods; the gods *we* believe in. But because he and I are wrong, he'll throw the whole thing aside, and go back to his native worship of money and success. It's in the blood of all his family and I can't see how he can escape it. So that will separate us, if other things don't."

"Are you making up your mind to leave him?" asked Jane.

"Things like that aren't done by making up one's mind."

"Well, do your bones tell you you're going to leave him?"

"My bones tell me it can't go on," said Valentine. Laughter tripped suddenly from her lips. "Oh, Jane, there are lovely things in the world. Marriage makes you forget there are lovely things."

But she would say no more.

Before dark, rain began to fall. Sullen clouds huddled from the south and west and tipped their contents over the plain. The Culver Hills were ghosts bodied forth in mist. What a night! Jane had caught her train just in time, thought Valentine as she curled up in the long window-seat and gazed into the dripping dusk towards the invisible shape of Heron Hill. Out under the apple-trees, Minx the cat was dancing a Bacchanalian dance on his hind legs with pieces of mouse. She opened the window.

"Minx, you degraded little brute, come in."

But he only spun round faster and tossed a disgusting fragment wildly above his head.

Presently Lily came in. "Did you say you were expecting some one to supper, m'm? It's getting very late and it's a wild wet night outside. Shouldn't I bring your supper in here on a tray, m'm, and then you could be cozy-like by the fire?" She raised those adoring brown eyes that enraged Humphrey with their look of devotion for his wife.

"Yes, Lily, that would be very nice."

She went once more to the open window. Rain threshed on the eaves and the thick creeper, and tinkled on the path; the night was black as a chimney filled with soot. Where was he? Sitting perturbed by his fire just as she was by hers? Steadily the downpour went on. "Oh, Francis, my dear, that's check for tonight. What shall we do about it? What will happen now?" Her cheeks kindled as she stared into the dark and wondered whether she was very sorry or very glad.

* * * * *

The room was booming with the voices of the three men. Humphrey had brought back with him the friend he had been staying with, a man he had known at Cambridge and in the Army, and Robert Blair had strolled over for lunch after the Sunday morning service.

"Do you find your things disappear much?" asked Humphrey of Blair. "The villagers have no respect for me whatsoever. If they want a spade or a lantern they just come along here and take it out of the shed."

"No," said Blair. "I must say I've never missed anything."

The fear of being "done," the suspicion that Lily was wasteful, that the gardener never put in his full time, that the tradesmen overcharged, gnawed perpetually at Humphrey's mind. But at present he was in a good humor and it was a relief to make a jocular approach to a sore subject.

"Oh, well, you're the parson, you're different," he laughed it off. "They steal from me because they think I'm not a gentleman—they despise me."

"On the contrary," said Blair, "they don't steal from me because they *know* I'm not a gentleman; I'm one of themselves. Coming back with me to look at the excavations? Yesterday we got out a lot of fragments of plasterwork from the walls. But of course the damned stuff crumbles away like pastry."

"You'd like to, wouldn't you?" Humphrey turned to his friend Chute.

"I should indeed."

Valentine strolled out into the garden. She wanted to be alone with her own thoughts, but Chute came out and joined her.

"You're coming, aren't you, Mrs. Spens?"

She gave him an amused look. "No, I'm not."

"Oh, why not? Aren't you interested? Does that sort of thing bore you?"

"No. But you see, it's Humphrey's province, and we don't like sharing our interests. He got it first and now it's all hung and ticketed Keep Off, and fenced round with barbed wire."

"Oh, come," he said awkwardly, "I'm sure that can't be true. It's rather a pity, isn't it, if people refuse to be interested in the same things?"

"All the same," said Valentine, "I don't propose to develop my passion for Roman remains until Humphrey has exhausted his."

But her voice was amused, detached. The words were colored counters to play with and arrange in different patterns. Secretly she was withdrawn: anticipation and remembrance flowed together in her mind.

Tomorrow she was going to see the bungalow on Heron Hill, just a week after Merryweather's first visit to her home. She had been telephoning in the hall when a shadow fell across the garden door and Francis Merryweather stood in the sunlight outside. Abruptly she had broken off the conversation and run to him with out-stretched hands. Since the frustrated meeting of the night before their intimacy in absence seemed to have taken a wild leap of growth.

"I wanted to come so badly," he murmured, "I didn't know what to do. I should have arrived wet to the skin, and then you had people here. And I'd never met your husband. But the rain was really frightful." He gave a quick whimsical smile. "I've hardly slept all night."

They stood in the doorway, gazing at one another with the rapt incredulous gaze of lovers, as though they had evoked a desired phantom and could not believe their eyes.

"Come in, come in," said Valentine, trembling. "I'll tell Lily you'll be staying to lunch."

"You're alone?"

"Yes, I'm alone."

When she returned he was standing in the center of the sitting-room, dark, watchful as wild life is watchful. It was impossible to imagine him going through the mental processes of an ordinary man: difficult to imagine him going through any mental processes at all. She knew intuitively that the beat of his blood would dictate his actions, and in that illuminate moment the workings of the civilized mind appeared to her clumsy and long-winded.

"Valentine," he said. "Valentine." She felt unready. His mouth quivered and worked at the corners; it seemed to her unbearable to watch his naked emotion; it was almost chilling, she felt so far behind it. But then he came towards her and his slight supple arms held her and his lips settled on hers as a bird settling on its nest, and it ceased to be necessary to dispute any further with her conscious mind.

Now, as she walked under the apple-trees with this dull man Chute, secret joy repaired the failing structure of her life and gave her a serenity she had never known since marriage.

"Did your husband never tell you what we called him in the Army, Mrs. Spens?" said the dull man, trying to strike the personal note in order to interest a silly woman. "We called him Blood-and-Iron Spens. Rather good, don't you think? All the young subalterns were terrified of him."

For a moment she raised her eyes to the distant contour of Heron Hill. "My darling, my darling, you're giving me safety. I could wear your love like armor. Nothing in the world could ever hurt me again if I had your love."

"I suppose," said Humphrey, looking in at the door of her room late that night, "you're not feeling particularly conjugal?"

She looked round at him with the brush in her hand, stilling the instant panic and forcing herself to calmness. "Why have separate rooms if we're going to lead a cat-and-dog life? I thought we agreed on that."

His face was intelligible to her, but she hated his limbs: they were heavy and meaningless.

"Oh, well," he yawned, "all right. I'm damned sleepy. Anyway, I hate the wooing business." He stumped off down the passage. Valentine, suddenly white, moved like a cat across the room and locked her door.

* * * * *

In the shorn field the dew-filled stubble wetted her ankles. Spider-webs lay flat in the grass, filigree, beaded with dew. At the end of the up-sloping acres there was a fence of wire netting, with the deep blue look of newness still on it; beyond that the hanging woods began. Everywhere the yellow of the falling year invaded the green, and glowed like flame upon the misted skies. Bosomed between two arms of the chalk downs lay the clearing, tilted almost perpendicular like a handkerchief held up by one corner; its floor was a web of feathery grass-heads, solidifying into patches of fur-capped thistle. In the corner of the handkerchief, tucked under a row of beech and yellowing maple, stood the bungalow, purplish, tarred over. It was a very ordinary little affair with a tin roof. Valentine felt chilled. She lingered in the tangle of the clearing, picking and eating the sun-warmed blackberries, until a halloo from the slope above told her she had been seen. Francis clambered down the steps and plunged along the twisted path that laced the clearing. At first they stood shy, not daring to touch.

"I thought you'd have forgotten."

"And I thought you'd have forgotten."

Then his lips closed on hers. "It isn't true. I thought you'd remember."

"Did you? Did you?" whispered the girl. "But I still thought *you'd* forget."

They dropped at once into the folly of lovers. Arm-in-arm they strolled along the green path, picking the berries and pressing them between each other's lips, and laughing as though life had become simple and full of joy.

"How long have you been here?" said she.

"I came in June."

"Oh, what a pity. We might have had the summer." She laughed, and nestled her face for a moment against his shoulder.

"Darling, there'll be other summers."

Again there came the working, naked and self-betraying, at the corners of his mouth. It brought back her feeling of the week before, in the sitting-room at the cottage, of diffidence in face of it, and a longing to be more moved than she really was. This time it gave her a minute of complete alienation.

"Let's go up to the house, shall we? I'm longing to see it," she said.

"Right you are," said he, releasing her. His instant awareness of her withdrawal was a consolation, and she looked at him with interest.

"Tell me, are you happy?"

"Me? Happy? Good lord, yes. Now, do you mean?"

"All the time, I meant."

"Certainly. Why not? Of course you're happy, if you look at life from the right point of view."

"And what," she said, pulling a stalk of dried grass and breaking it off into equal lengths, "is the right point of view?"

He glowed, a lovely animal endowed with human intelligence but not a human soul. "To any one with a spark of sense, life is simply the opportunity for exquisite sensation. Man is free; his chains are only psychological; let him shake off his fears and shames and get out into the sun and enjoy himself. He can do as he likes if he has the courage: well, let him, that's my point of view."

"The Rousseau of Heron Hill," she said derisively. "Well, God forbid that I should hold any brief for fears and shames, but all the same I have doubts about exquisite sensation as a complete philosophy of life."

"You can philosophize till all's blue," he retorted in his curiously rustic voice, "but you'll get nothing more real than your own sensations at the end of it all. Here we are."

Their feet resounded on the wooden steps that led up to the door: within was a narrow passage with a door opening out of it on either side. In the little living-room was a dresser painted blue and yellow, a long black stove, a few chairs and a big table in front of the window. Drawings of bookcases and tables were pinned up on the walls. There was no attempt at comfort. She sat on the table and peered out of the window.

"What a lovely view. Doesn't Pilgrim Beacon look bald from here?"

Indeed it was lovely—the mellow fields sloping down into the plain from the clearing, and the leafy cavern of the woods at its edge barred about by the elephant-gray bodies of the beech-trees. And the house under the maple might have been the last house left in the world.

He came towards her and gathered her against him.

"Valentine, my beautiful, you love me?"

"Yes."

"And we'll be lovers?"

"Yes."

"Now?"

She pushed him away, startled. "No, of course not. Some day: I don't know. I should have to tell Humphrey."

"Tell Humphrey?" The dark glow faded out of his face.

"Of course. You don't suppose I'm going to tell lies to my husband, do you?" Anxiety sharpened her voice, and he enfolded her again.

"Why tell him anything?" he whispered. "Why can't we have our secret? Up here in this little house—no one will know, why drag in other people? You're alone all day: can't we do as we like without a parcel of silly people interfering?"

It was early for a radical disagreement, but Valentine went cold with dread. Had their recognition after all been meaningless? Did this relationship which already loomed so momentously to her mean any more to him than the most casual of exchanges with a girl at one of the hill farms? He was foreign, foreign: with his gypsy air and his rustic tongue and his furniture-designing, what was she to make of him? Of course she wanted to believe him less shallow than his plans or his philosophy suggested, but if she tried to interpret that deep and secret wholeness of his in terms of ordinary human personality she would surely be mistaken. He was no doubt self-educated; he had not the ease in shuffling the fashionable intellectual counters which characterized most of the men she knew, nor did he live from their cold cerebral center, yet he was not an advance on their type but rather a throw-back, nearer perhaps to Paleolithic man than to any type known to history.

She moved from his arms and stood facing him.

"What are we to do? Shall we say no to it while there's still time?"

"Are you sure there's still time?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Well, perhaps I'm not so sure."

He took his advantage and this time she did not move away. "How can I be sure of anything when you kiss me like that? I feel helpless, like a paper boat on a stream. Francis, do you want me really? I mean, is it love, or is it just a St. Martin's summer madness?"

His lips caressed her throat and fanned the excitement she would not yet admit. "Which do you think it is? Oh, Valentine, I can't stop thinking of you for a second. You've got into my blood, you little image. All this week I've been lying out on the grass below the house, with my eyes on the path, waiting for you to come. I knew you wouldn't come for a week—you said so, how could I expect you? And yet you know, I did. I'd go into the house for some tobacco or a tray of food, and then I'd bolt out again like a lunatic in case you'd come into sight."

Evidently there was something really *there*. What it was baffled her. She felt that he was imposing upon her some oddly alluring character she did not possess, and adoring it in her person, in some arbitrary way. And as for herself, she was confused. At the bottom of her heart, she suspected that she disliked him. But he affected her powerfully, he gave her always this desired and yet repellent sensation of being dragged down into an unknown dark. His words twittered and chinked along on the surface of things, but beneath the chinking current of words there seemed a strange powerful rock of being.

At last the sun was westering over the hazy plain; it was time for her to go.

"Shall I come with you?" he said. "I'll come as far as the end of the footpath."

She picked a blackberry from the bush beside the hut. It was cold now as a frog or a fish, all its ambrosial warmth gone back into the sun.

"No, I'd rather go alone."

"When shall I see you again?"

She touched his hand gently. "Wait a little. Do you mind? I must clear things up with Humphrey. He's always told me I was free, you see. But I don't really want to stay with him any more; we're all wrong together. Perhaps I could go back to London and get a job of some kind. I don't want to bring you into it."

But at that he flamed up in ardor. "Bring me into it as much as you like. I don't care what happens, I'll do anything you want. But we must be together. After today I'm sure of that, aren't you?" He began to caress her again. "I'll do all you want, my lovely. If you want to tell him, tell him. But you must come here and be my love. Soon, Valentine?"

"Soon."

* * * * *

The thief which wastes the taper of our life was consuming the days at a voracious rate, yet still she procrastinated. She wanted to tell Humphrey, she wanted to tell Jane; at times she could even have confided in Mrs. Namble. But the first phase of love had to accomplish itself before she could look at the whole question as a problem which must be solved in some practical way, and during that phase it did not even occur to her to examine the relationship between the image that haunted her mind and the almost unknown being on Heron Hill. They exchanged letters that grew daily tenderer. Meanwhile the air sharpened each evening with the afterglow that stayed ever more lingeringly crimson at the edge of the plain, the bryony berries reddened, and the wind rose up blotted with leaves. The village children went nutting in the copses and came home dragging faggots from the woods.

But one day at last Valentine came in from a late walk, aglow with decision. Her whole being leant towards the new man in a passion of gratitude for the sense of life he had evoked in her, and for his exorcising of the old devouring sense of death. She walked straight into the sitting-room, and was startled to find Humphrey there, reading the paper.

"Hello, so you're back already?" she said, trying to conceal a twinge of alarm. She crossed over to the table, bending her head over the chrysanthemums in the tall vase. "Why, how lovely. Lily's thrown away the withered ones and brought in these. I believe they're from her mother's garden."

Humphrey looked up. "It's not the servant's business to arrange the flowers. And why can you never manage to be in when I get back? You never think of any one but yourself. I came down early on purpose, because I wanted to talk to you."

She returned his look, sparkling with bravado. "My dear Hump, if you'd told me you were coming down early I would have arranged to be in. I wanted to talk to you as well. But," and she couldn't resist a little jibe in Sikey's manner, "to the egocentric all men are egocentric."

"I'm not precisely in the humor for that sort of thing," he glowered. "After a long day in town . . ."

Perhaps after all his persistent ill-temper had been an unconscious device to force their unfortunate situation to a conclusion. If that were so she couldn't blame him, and it would be a relief to believe that it did not spring simply from the desire to bully and to pass his grievance with existence on to her. Her face softened as she came and sat down opposite him.

"Poor old Hump. I'm sorry, old fellow. What did you want to say to me?"

He laid down his paper. "I wondered whether it mightn't be a good plan for me to live in town during the week and just come down here at week-ends. You see the A.O. is extending; my salary will be raised at the end of the year so we shan't have to worry about every penny. Besides, Chute's lease is up in December; he'll have to find somewhere else to live, and I might go in with him."

There was a sense of something a little concealed behind all this manifest candor.

"I think it's an excellent plan; admirable in every way.

But—have you any really intimate reason for suddenly wanting to live in town?"

"No, no."

"You only hope to have?" she threw out mischievously, and he looked embarrassed. That sobered her.

"In fact, Humphrey, I think we'd better give up this cottage altogether. You want to go your way, and I certainly want to go mine. Before I've fallen to bits with dry-rot and inefficiency I propose to go back to town and find work."

"Propose?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"Certainly. You don't really want me and I don't want you. Let's cut clear while we're about it."

He rose and stood with his back to the fire, looking down at her with an almost fanatical expression. "Shut up, woman. Shut up, I say. If you don't like the idea of my living in town we'll drop the subject. But I'm not going to discuss anything so preposterous as a separation. I consider myself married to you, and that's conclusive."

Fear of him was at last over. She stretched out her legs towards the fire, utterly calm. "It's not conclusive for me. We don't love each other and we've endured more than two years of absolute misery. If it were misery that led somewhere I shouldn't mind; I can set my teeth and put up with things if there's a glimmer of a purpose in it all. But there's none, none, none."

He was pale with rage: the fact that she put into words the knowledge common to them both but suppressed at least on his side meant that she was thwarting him, flouting him. But she went on unmoved:

"I suppose it's my fault as much as yours, Hump, but you see, I know you're not the man for me. With you I feel as though everything's dying inside me. You've never given me my own womanhood. In your heart you hate and fear life, and you want to make me hate and fear it too. Well, I know now that I don't."

He caught at that. "You know *now?"*

"Yes, I know now," she repeated, getting up and going over to the window. Cassiopeia was pricking through the dusk above the hills; Capella gleamed northward in the sharp air. Hate life? Ah, no, it was exquisite still, as perhaps the early world had found it when the morning stars sang together, before the priest supplied man with a sense of shame and the lawyer with litigation and the god Terminus. *O the rising of the sun, The running of the deer.* But if she stayed bound to this man she would surely die.

"And what," said his voice behind her, coldly controlled this time, "has so wonderfully clarified your point of view?"

It was no use; she had better let him have it; nothing less would content him. She turned round.

"I'm in love with another man."

Already pale, his face grew chalky; there was a twitching in his fingers. He looked like a man within sight of a long-expected enemy, and in mortal fear.

"Valentine, is this true?"

Pity and a sort of hard triumphant joy warred in her heart. "Yes, it's true."

There was a long silence. She almost anticipated a scream of rage at the end of it, but he crumpled into a chair, sobbing violently like a child. For a while she could not move towards him; she was held apart in her angry revengeful triumph. After all, it was he who had imposed unhappiness upon her, not she on him; it was she who had borne the burden of misery for two long years and more, he who had had only a vague dissatisfaction to support. Until marriage, her attitude to life had been joyful, acceptant; but poor Humphrey in spite of his expressions of dominance was trussed up mentally like a chicken, skewered through with shames and fears, and would never know peace of heart until she was as like himself as he could make her.

But still the sobs continued, and in a sudden wave of the old lost tenderness she went and stroked his head.

"Don't, my lamb, don't. I never thought it would upset you like this." The words sounded weak and empty; she had no consolation to offer him. But she continued to stroke his head until he recovered himself enough to ask her, "Who is it?"

"No one you know."

He pushed her hand away and sat upright. "Damn it, I've a right to know. Tell me who it is."

The return of the dictatorial tone made her draw into herself again, and he saw his mistake.

"Valentine, this is torture. I *must* know, I must know everything you can tell me."

"You won't like it."

"Does he live near here?"

"Yes. Up on the ridge, a few miles away. You needn't try to tear it out of me, like a game of clumps. I've known him about a month. And I've been in love with him from the moment I met him. Perhaps before," she added half-aloud. It was impossible to watch Humphrey's face with anything but detachment. Although he had a broad fine brow she had the feeling that his eyes were popping out at the top of his head, like frogs' eyes. Again there was silence.

"Has he money?" he demanded at last.

"No. Not money in the Spens sense," she added maliciously.

But he let that pass. "Is he a gentleman?"

"No."

A flare of rage broke out again. "And you think I'm going to sit still and fold my hands while you behave in this preposterous fashion with some impossible fellow who will only let you down in the end, and meanwhile make me the laughing-stock of the countryside?"

"Oh, what's the use of talking to you? You don't talk, you only rage," said Valentine wearily. "Will you try to grasp the fact that I love this man, that we both know our married life has been a failure, and that I want to go away. You can divorce me, you can do what you like. But I know that if I don't go now you'll simply break me down and I shan't be fit to earn my bread ever again."

Rage deserted him, only to set free sobs once more. "Do you really mean to be this man's mistress?"

"Yes, I do. I'm not going to argue with you. It's a fact you'll have to accept. I'll pack my things and go as soon as you like."

Tears splashed on to his hand, and he broke down completely. "Valentine, we did love each other once. It's got all wrong, I know, but I've never loved any woman in my life except you. Can't we make it up, Val? Do let this—this thing—drop and let our marriage have another chance. I'll try to make you happier."

"It isn't in your power to make me happy," she said desperately.

And from the bottom of her heart she knew it was true. Life with Humphrey was full of meanness and decay: it reminded her of station approaches, of second-hand-clothes shops, of public lavatories and Sunday newspapers, of streets of offices where commodities are written about but never made. It was, in fact, death and not life. And the efforts she made to get clear of it were as convulsive and desperate as those of a swimmer half-submerged.

"What did we marry for?" she cried. "Because we had the same ideas. Good Lord, what a basis for marriage! Agreements over socialism; a mutual love of country walks and of old furniture; a common admiration of Tchehov or Proust; anything but the consent of the flesh. Our love was all tucked away in our skulls and the rest of us could atrophy."

But he clung to her as though he too despaired and she alone could help him. "Valentine, if it's true and there's no help for it, you must promise me you'll never leave me. I can't get along alone; I simply can't face it. Promise me, promise me," and he clung to her and sobbed like a lost child. She tried to drag away.

"Oh, let me go, let me go, Humphrey. We're no good together; I can't stand any more. Let me get away and find my feet again in London. You'd be far happier yourself with some one else. Or was all your talk of freedom just empty theory?"

"No, it wasn't," he answered, stung. "I'm willing to stand by it: I want to stand by it. Have an affair if you want to; I'll stick to what I said. But if you do, I'm not going to let you go. You can do as you like about it but you're not to leave me."

"Not to?" she threw out.

"No, no, Val, I don't mean that. But if you go altogether, I shan't go on living without you, so understand that. I might even shoot him too," he added with an insane little giggle.

"Oh, hush, hush. This is awful. How could I tell you were going to feel like this? It was your own idea first. And what about this plan of yours to live in London?"

He sat upright in the chair, pale and surly, and picked up the evening paper he had thrown aside. "I shouldn't dream of going to live in town now. I shall stay down here and try to make you love me again."

She looked at him with horror. "If you threaten murder and suicide, I suppose it's a fair weapon, though I shouldn't have expected it from you. But could you tell me exactly why you don't want me to go altogether?"

"You're my wife. You're free to have your little affairs; I'm not a slave-owner. But I won't be let down in front of everybody and I won't allow you to let me down. That's absolutely my last word on the subject." And he began to read his paper as though his whole chance of heavenly as well as earthly salvation depended upon his comprehension of the financial page. But the fingers that held it shook.

* * * * *

Through every corner of the cottage ripped the sound of the telephone bell. Valentine, heavy with sleeplessness, went into the hall to answer it. A wedge of sunlight lay across the doorway.

"Hello."

"Hello, darling. Do you know a village called Waggoner's Water?"

"No, Jane, I don't. Is this a code question?"

"No, it isn't. I want to go there for the week-end and it's in your hills. Could you meet me there this afternoon?"

"I'd love to. That's the nice surprising sort of question I thought nobody would ever ask me again in this world. Where is it?"

"Somewhere in the middle of the Culvers. You'll have to walk about ten miles. And at the end of it there mayn't even be a village. But I know there's a pub. We'd stay the night."

"Jane, how charming. I'll meet you at the pub this afternoon, then. Darling, what a lovely plan."

"I know. I said to myself, 'You're getting too set in your ways, Jane my lass. Since Sikey went you just sit in the flat and moon.' So I got out an ordnance map and I found Waggoner's Water. It's got those tufts on it which mean a common or a marsh. No, *not* another three minutes, Exchange. Good-by."

Now as she climbed the flinty hill-road above the village she was preparing to lay aside the whole business of Humphrey. "Like a parcel," she thought. "May I leave this here for a day or two? I'll be sure to call for it on my way back." But the contents of the parcel still summoned her to look them over before dismissing them from her mind. They were complicated and rather ugly. She recollected how Humphrey had come to her room in the night, in another storm of grief. "Valentine, I've been utterly stupid; I've let myself forget. I'd somehow forgotten you were so dear to me. Do you remember how lovely things were, that first spring? You've always been spring in my mind, you know; spring and all the little bright things coming out. Oh, Val, put this other thing out of your mind: let us be as we were." And then her own despairing refusals and the enforced renewal of her promise not to leave him. The whole thing had bewildered and staggered her; she had seen so clearly that the only difficulties would be the simple difficulties of getting back into harness and finding work she would necessarily dislike. Humphrey's unlooked-for attitude made her wonder, as she walked, what other amazements injurious Time might hold. At present she was aware that her hold on Francis was stronger than his on her; she could indulge in an errant mood more freely than he could. But moody as her love of him was at moments, it had tenacious roots and an almost endless possibility of growth: whereas, what would be left of his when his romanticizing of her was done? *"How I my future state By silent thinking antedate,"* murmured along the corridors of her mind.

Up on the hills burned the stormy conflagration of autumn, the beechwoods tawny-yellow, the maple wan as a gas-jet, the buckthorn a deep matt crimson. The roadside banks were tattered with bramble and thinning clumps of nettle. A mile or two along the high road that crowned the escarpment she passed a small public-house, lonely as a milestone, beside a slime-lined pond; then a farm built of flints and edged with brick, with long barns at the back and a group of new pale ricks; and came at last to a grassy lane leading down the hill. This was evidently the way down through the wood to the little house on Heron Hill, a direction from which she had not yet approached it.

The lane tunneled its way through the trees at the wood's edge; its surface, cut and deeply rutted by the wheels of timber-wagons and the hooves of their laboring horses, was strewn with new-fallen beech-leaves, as flat as pennies. The turn of a corner, and she caught her breath; a dark figure with bent head was loping along the lane.

"Francis! Francis!"

The figure raised its head, and came hurrying up the slope towards her. "Lovely little thing, I thought you were never coming to see me again." He began to kiss her.

"Darling, let me get out of this horrible knapsack and be embraced properly. Oh, it's heavenly to see you. Where were you going?"

"Radnor End. Saturday shopping. I was wondering whether I dare come to your house, just before I heard you call."

They stayed their kisses for an enraptured glance, and then clung together again. Down the air of the lane's hushed tunnel a leaf swam slowly, dipping from side to side.

"Well?" said the man at last, tilting up her face. "Well?"

"I'm coming to you tomorrow," she admitted.

"Truly?"

"Truly I am. He knows about it."

"What does he say?"

"Of course he doesn't like it. I believe the idea of some other man wanting me had never properly entered his imagination. And he won't let me go. I suppose I could go all the same. But he frightens me; I daren't leave him—now, at any rate. Later on, who knows? You may tire of me."

"Or you of me."

Their eyes mocked, brooded; another embrace submerged their words. But a little saddened, they walked together up the lane and paused beside a gate in the hedge, where the grassy opening came like a tributary to the road across the hills.

"Where you going now?" he demanded.

She told him. "I've left him a note, saying that I'm spending the week-end with Jane. Perhaps it'll make it easier for him. But I expect it will come on when I get back; I'm a bad hand at lying. I can feel a silly expression coming over my face that says plainer than any words, 'Of course I know I can't expect you to believe a cock-and-bull story like this!' And you see, when I lived with Jane and Sikey we used to take so much trouble over the truth that it goes frightfully against the grain."

He looked away rather gloomily over the gate and the plowed field beyond, with its endless crested furrows, like waves on a choppy sea.

"What's the matter?" she said, slipping her hands into his again.

"I don't like your going. I wish you'd stay here with me tonight." His kisses seemed to drag at her will. "Stay with me, little image. Don't go to Jane."

"But I can't," she wailed, "I can't let her down. I told her I'd meet her at Waggoner's Water. After all, darling, it's only a day to wait. Don't look so sulky, or perhaps I won't come at all."

"Oh, have it your own way," he said, with harshness in his tone. "You always will have it your own way, won't you?"

But he kissed her fiercely and his fingers wooed her breast.

"Ah, don't," she said, terribly melted. His face above her was dark and ardent. She became faint and will-less in his arms.

"I know you love me," he whispered with his dark fond look. "I know you love me now. I know you'll come tomorrow." Sharply he unloosed her. "Now go, go, or I'll seduce you here and now."

They turned and waved in the white road until a loop of the woods hid them from one another, and the girl walked on southward by the twisting tattered lanes to Waggoner's Water, brooding upon her own bliss. Happiness was no longer a childish fantasy, a blue bird or a golden apple flashing deliciously just out of reach in the branches above her head; it drowsed on her eyelids now like the dust of sleep, throbbed in her breast and in the pulse at the base of her throat; she held it lying soft and warm between her two hands. Ah, happiness! What a lit blue vista it promised ahead, and how it illuminated and endowed with meaning even the dead past: she could read by the light of its present radiance all she had lacked in the bad old days with Humphrey. But she was tense with apprehension, and this day and night with Jane would be a needed relief to that tension. A younger, gayer sort of pleasure brimmed her mind at the thought of Jane and her sudden demand; the modern come-out-to-play summons of one female to another. And as they sat out on the rusty common together in the late afternoon sun, hearing the distant chink of a goat-bell and watching the plump geese that roved about the soft green turf, the years slid from them like the autumn leaves that were flaunting down the air, and restored them to a lost childishness.

"In fact, men are very ageing to women," declared Valentine, pulling a late pale harebell from beneath a clump of gorse and twisting it into her frock. She lay back among the bracken and shut her eyes. "Wasn't life charming when we were twenty? Do you remember how when we were very hard up we used to go out on bicycles from Hampstead into the country and sleep under haystacks? Think of it, *bicycles!* And haystacks! And it was never possible to sleep after four in the morning. I remember I used to wake up to see two gray faces solemnly munching biscuits, up to their necks in hay."

"The midges bit like hell," said Jane dreamily.

"And do you remember how we found ourselves in Aylesbury market-place one Sunday morning at half-past five, and in the middle of a discussion about single-tax we all suddenly fell asleep on the benches in front of the clock, and went on sleeping till a stable-boy clattered across the cobbles on horseback and shouted, 'Time to get up, ladies.' "

"M'm," said Jane. "And do you remember how we discovered that all the bus-conductors say eggs instead of thanks?"

"Oh, *yes,*" breathed Valentine, rapt. "And how they say Pengley Sung at Piccadilly Circus on the tube, and Pay Again at Notting Hill Gate. How it brings back our lovely youth. Tell me, Jane, do you like life?"

"I like it well enough when I don't think about it," Jane pondered cautiously. "But you see, I don't expect ecstasies and you do."

Valentine sparkled. "But supposing I get them?" She sat up again, and laughed at Jane's expression of curiosity. It seemed to her in the sleepy autumn weather such a pity that every one in her world was not in love, their veins shot with the same racing fire that filled her own, their eyes holding a lit mysterious interchange: "Ah, you too?" But Jane's reaction was tinged with anxiety.

"What's happened, Valentine? Who is it? What are you going to do?"

"I'm in love. He's marvelous. He's so—" She hesitated for a word, and finally brought out, *"secret."*

"Secret?"

"Yes. Like a lovely animal, not a worn intellectual. His philosophy seems to be the crudest hedonism, but that's not the nicest part about him. And I don't know what there is between us, except that it's enchanting. It's like being born into a new world. I believe I'm going to love him tremendously."

She looked at her friend, sparkling, defiant.

"Well," said Jane in a troubled voice, "I don't want you to imitate Sikey. One in the family is bad enough."

"Sikey? Imitate Sikey? But I'm in love, really in love," protested Valentine.

The next day was muffled in mist; the distances beyond the common were obscured; drops pattered from the trees like footsteps all day long. After tea they sat in the bar-parlor of the inn for a while before they parted. Valentine plucked at the bobbed fringe of the red serge tablecloth.

"Don't mention any of this to Sikey in your letters," she said at last. "At present I feel shy of her knowing. She's so cynical about anything to do with sex, and I should hate this affair to be put into a light sort of category. I can't help it; I do feel rather romantical about him; even sentimental. I don't care; I've lost my fear of words like that. If it's marvelous to me then it *is* marvelous, no matter what it seems to you."

"You don't need to apologize for being in love, darling," said Jane. She laughed, and touched Valentine's hand caressingly. "Bring him to see me at the flat one day."

"I might. One day perhaps. But at the moment I feel I don't want to take him to see any one, ever. I should like to live with him on Heron Hill for the rest of my days, and never see another soul all my life long."

"In another year," said Jane, "you'll probably think that that would be a fairly exact definition of hell."

"All the world loathes a lover," retorted Valentine. "Even you, Jane. Well, I can't blame them if they're jealous of our emotions, for they seem to me poor blind moles tunneling in darkness themselves."

She looked across at Jane, tender and ironic, but even while looking she ceased to be aware, absorbed in the experience that had claimed her.

A faint wind bestirred itself, gathered force, drove off the cowl of mist that had hung about the hills all day. Lakes of moonlight were beginning to accumulate under the boughs of beech, driving out darkness as imperceptibly as water poured into a jug drives out air. Jane and the very thought of Jane were left behind as Valentine left Waggoner's Water, dropped as she had dropped Humphrey the day before to pick up the exquisite burden of contemplating Francis. At the crossroads, the sign-post stood like an ivory crucifix against a black massed copse. Down Heron Hill the tunneled lane shifted with a pantomime of shadows. The black gable of the bungalow peaked up under the trees, and light came arrowy from the window of the little room. She stood beside the mesh of bramble bushes, waiting for something; a sign, a signal, she did not know what. Still the light beamed from the window, and beneath the bushes there came the darts and scuffles of an almost subterranean life. How quiet it was! If a twig broke, the sound soared through the wood like a rocket. What was it really like, the life of the man within? Or if you came to that, what was *he* like? Standing hesitant among the bushes, she felt that the meaning of all her actions was escaping her; her own reality ebbed away; she could almost have strolled on down the hill and stolen off, back to Radnor End. But then a dark faith repossessed her and she moved towards the house. A leash of bramble dragged at her ankle but she did not feel the pain. Stumbling forward, she ran lightly up the steps and into the hut.

Francis was sitting by the fire; a pipe lay on the stove, and he was bending over a drawing-board held on his knee. He pushed it aside and darted towards her. His movements, quick and very subtle, swept away her last misgivings as she let herself relax blindly into his arms.

Presently. "Do you want anything to eat?" he asked her.

"What have you got?"

"Milk, eggs, cheese, stuff in tins; that sort of thing."

"Let's make an omelette, then."

"Right you are, my pretty."

The common domestic actions blunted the strange edge of her feeling for him as she beat up the eggs, while he put a frying-pan to sizzle on the stove. Clop, clop, went the fork against the side of the basin, and swish, the mixture was rushed into the pan. But they could not take their eyes from one another.

"This is going to be a rotten omelette," murmured Valentine. It gave her a pang to turn her gaze and watch the golden bubbles coming up in the frying-pan. He pulled her up with a sudden cry.

"What's that, what have you done to your ankle?"

She looked down, the fork still in her hand. A rain of crimson had spattered the ankle of her pale knitted stocking.

"Blood, it is. I caught it on the brambles outside."

"My dear! Take off your stocking; we must put some sticking-plaster on it."

Down she sat in the wicker chair and peeled off her stocking: a loop of dark links had scarred the flesh like a bracelet. Slow tears of blood began to gather on them as the stocking tore away. He examined them in concern.

"I say, old man, you're positively wounded. Wait a minute, I'll bathe it for you."

He wrung out a handkerchief in hot water and dabbed the scars with tender, subtle touches. Entranced, she leant down and kissed the bent black head. When he had bandaged the scratches he looked up in pride.

"There, that's made a good job of it. Well, you look a nice affair with one stocking off and one on." He pushed back her skirt and kissed her above the knee. Desire rose in him like a flame. "Take off your clothes, little image, take off your clothes."

But it was all too foreign to her; she felt shy, like a virgin; a small spirit of virgin mockery still possessed her; her sensual being was not yet born. She turned defensively from his eyes and looked into the frying-pan that still sizzled faintly at the side of the stove.

"Oh, a *rotten* omelette," she cried.

They watched each other, nervous and aware. Her half-born femininity pleaded with him to put her restless ticking consciousness to sleep, but he felt repulsed and afraid of the endless assertion of the female will. Silently he turned away and took down plates from the dresser and began to lay the table. For a while they could not meet each other's eyes. Both knew that the bloom of a moment that would not come again had been brushed away. They loved, but their hearts were alien and full of a dumb reproach.

* * * * *

Mrs. Namble sat in her cottage sewing. A late fly buzzed on the pane behind the geraniums. As she sewed, the beautiful hazel eyes grew luminous with content, for Mrs. Namble knew with a profound and humorous knowledge that life was not always as serene and restful as this. Alice and Susie were good girls, to be sure, but better at a distance than when they used to go rackety-clackety about the cottage all day long with their tongues and their muddy boots. Good girls they were; the one married to a man in regular work, a gardener over at The Croft, and the other in service down the line at Blisloe. About them her mind was at peace, as it was about her husband Albert, laid safely in the churchyard at Radnor End these seven years. A good husband he had been, her old man. But ah, to have the cottage quiet, to be respected and independent in the village, with never a quarrel nor an ill word to anybody; to live as well as die at rest. Marriage and maternity might be the crown of a woman's life, but the head was uneasy that wore it, as Mrs. Namble well knew, and she preferred the cap of widowhood to any glory which such a crown had ever conferred on her.

Outside the cottage the world was full of blown leaves and the sound of running water; soon the whole countryside would be darkening towards the year's end. She peered idly out of the window. Down the road marched a young woman with a familiar gait; a knapsack like a camel's hump bulged on her shoulders.

"Bless us, Miss Valentine. Now what's *she* been up to?" cogitated Mrs. Namble. She laid aside her sewing and made up the fire, her ears alert for footsteps on the path. Sure enough, in she came, blown by the wind to the color of the whitebeam berries in the hedge.

"Come to tea, have you, lovey? Where've you bin gadding, in a wind like this?" demanded the stout woman.

Valentine swung her knapsack from her shoulder. "Been for a walk, Namkin."

An incisive glance was all the comment Mrs. Namble felt prepared to give, and the girl sat down by the fire, glowing like a poppy in the little close room.

"I mean," she added, "I've been having a week-end at a village up in the Culvers with Miss Napier—Jane, you know. It's been so lovely: we walked and walked. At least," she corrected herself, "*I* walked and walked. There and back again."

There was a pause. "Oh, keep it to yourself. *I'm* not querulous," said Mrs. Namble, never shifting her bright eyes from her visitor's face. Another pause succeeded. She darted a hawklike glance to the girl's skirt and stockings. "Gracious me, you're covered in burrs. Bin lying about in the woods, I reckon. Come here and let me pick them off you, girl, or what 'ud Mr. Spens say if he saw you like that?"

Valentine looked down. Teazles nested in the hem of the skirt, and her stockings were sown with the conical green seeds of the agrimony.

"Sure there aren't no pine-needles in your hair nor a bit of a fir-cone stuck on to your shoulders?" demanded her hostess, very ironical. The girl's face broke into a little helpless smile, and Mrs. Namble, seeing her so lost and vulnerable, turned to make the tea, chattering about Radnor End. "Now my Alice, she told me on Tuesday . . . they saw the Rector about it . . . a shilling hop in the schools . . ." The warm room and the flow of talk overpowered Valentine as she sat in the chair by the fire; she remained silent, with drooped head and flickering lashes.

"Huh. You'll go to sleep without rocking tonight," prophesied Mrs. Namble grimly. Valentine opened her eyes in astonishment and an effort to keep awake. "Ah, don't look at me like that, with your innocent blue eyes!" she cried, bursting into derisive laughter. "It's Mr. Merryweather, isn't it? Aye, I thought as much. I felt it in the air, girl, before ever you'd seen him."

"Are you a witch?" said Valentine. "Did you mean it to happen?" Like a baby, she rubbed her eyes with her fists and sat up blinking.

"Mean? Mean? Well, what in this blessed world could I 'a' done?" Mrs. Namble made earnest nonsense of the suggestion. "Now you shan't lay the mischief at my door, Miss Valentine, that you shan't, not if I never parts me hands again." She looked severely at her sleepy guest. "Not but what your life's bin sad and his is lonely," she added inconsequently. But it fell on the girl's ear like a blessing.

* * * * *

Living with Humphrey was rather like wearing a shift made of sandpaper: it was necessary to settle down to a permanent condition of discomfort that was almost, but not quite, unbearable. Of course she had been obliged to tell him how she had spent the three days of absence, and he had alternated between gloomy cynicism and fits of unrestrained fury. But the breath of a suggestion that she would leave Radnor End permanently was sufficient to reduce him to a state of abject propitiation. At one moment she was reviled as the betrayer of a sacred relation, at another supplicated as a female deity who controlled his fortunes. For several days she was too spent to realize that she had heard no word from Francis since her visit to Heron Hill.

"Emotion," she reflected, "is not an inexhaustible reservoir. It isn't even elastic. It is a perfectly fixed quantity, like sixpenny-worth a day. And if you spend fivepence-halfpenny-worth on violent scenes with one person, no matter how your will to love may exert itself towards another, there's only a bare halfpenny-worth left, and neither God nor Aphrodite nor the Astronomer Royal himself can make it more."

It was November now: the days were short and chill and the whole landscape wan. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a panic rose in her being: there was no letter, and still no letter; was he ill, or faithless, or indifferent? Had he, resentful of the coldness which Humphrey had enforced upon her and she had not yet been able to banish, perhaps left the Culvers without even letting her know? Certainly her first visit there had been less a flight into freedom than a half-fettered stirring towards some consummation dimly divined; every moment had been burdened with unfulfilled premonitions of delight. Now she was in mortal fear, suffered a crisis every day when the post arrived, yet could not bring herself to make any movement towards seeing him.

At breakfast one morning Humphrey tore open a letter with a great air of satisfaction. "Oh, good, that's splendid. Val, I've asked Mabel and my mother here for a week. They're coming the day after tomorrow, on their way to town. And after that I want to have Chute down for a week or two."

She would not look at him; he seemed to her devilish, Machiavellian. He would concede the principle of freedom and then try to crowd her hours out with slavery. He had even said to her, "Well, you've proved your point; now you know you're free. What more do you want?" As though (she had raged) he saw no difference between an organic relationship and going out to buy a pound of tea!

Well, if he were going to ring her round with his family and Chute, there was no time to be lost. She set out that morning for the hills. The plain was emptied of color except for one startling yellow elm against the dun skies of November, which the winds had left freakishly unstripped. She dragged up the steep road and a host of dim fears assailed her heart. Did they love or did they not?

Would they stay lovers or wouldn't they? She felt almost too numbed and stupefied to care.

Above the hedges on the hill road, filigree now or barely freckled with leaves, the telegraph poles soared with their coronets of gleaming insulators, the only bright things in all the brown dead landscape. The five-barred gates by the road were studded with drops from a night's rain, and puddles had gathered in the hollows. As she turned the corner of the lane into the clearing her heart almost stopped; no feather of smoke was waving from the chimney. Had he gone, after all? She was shocked into a violent knowledge of her passion for him. Forlorn as the day itself, she sat down on the steps, unable to stem the tide of grief which swept over her. But when its first anguish had subsided, she pulled herself together sharply. "What a fool you are, woman. Why can't he simply have gone out, like any ordinary person? Why this perfervid storm of feeling? Calm yourself!"

She tried the latch; the door was open. But in the sitting-room the fire was gray in the stove; the hearth was sleeted over with fragments of sharpened pencils, and a day-old newspaper was tossed into the wicker chair. The heart seemed to be torn out of the little house; without Francis Merryweather it was ugly and desolate. She stole outside into the clearing, and saw a brown figure moving about at the edge of the wood. "It's Francis." Relief overcame her. "It isn't Francis." No, it wasn't Francis; an old bowed woman was gathering moss in the deep-cut boundary that separated the clearing from the wood itself.

She set off to walk back across the hills, in a daze of raw and poignant misery. The slow dull suffering Humphrey had caused her was not in the same world with this unforeseen despair; it was keen with the pangs of birth and not of dissolution. But that picture of the sodden wood, the rusty clearing, and the bowed figure moving at the foot of the trees with the patient hopelessness of old age, had penetrated her mind with the shock of revelation. Things might after all be "all right"; there might even be years of happiness ahead for her and Francis, but it would be like a flimsy dream beside what had overtaken her in that moment. "I feel that when I'm lying on my deathbed that will be the last thing I shall see," she brooded. "Just that alone, as though there had been nothing else of significance in my life: that wet stripped wood in November, and the old woman whose face I never saw, stooping to gather moss." Then, a little detached, she tried to shake herself free. "Good God, at it again, sentimentalist! *How I my future state By silent thinking antedate.* Why can't you learn to live in the present like a healthy animal?"

At the head of the hill road she was roused from fantasy by a shout. "Hello, hello, you. What are you doing?"

Francis came running up to her. The lines of his face were keen and glowing after the long walk up the hill. She looked on him bewildered, as though she had created him by mistake. "Wake up, wake up, little stupid," he murmured, taking her into his arms. "Don't look so lost. Where were you going?"

She leant against his shoulder, silently weeping.

"What on earth's the matter? Tell me, Valentine. You know, I've just been down to Radnor End to see you. I don't know what's been up. We seemed to have lost each other. There, my little one, my pretty, don't cry."

"I love you. I just love you, hopelessly, on and on. Everything else is nonsense. If you don't love me back I shall simply die," she declared, with tears streaming down her face.

He pulled out a handkerchief. "Let me dry your eyes, darling. What a baby you are. You know I adore you. Oh, God, what a week it's been."

He pressed her close; his hands subtly caressed her. She dabbed at his shoulder with the handkerchief.

"There, my tears have wet your coat. Let me dry them; I'm sure salt water rots the fabric." Laughter began to glint over her face. "Oh, what a wet world!"

"It won't be wet in the fir plantation," he said. She followed his glance. Across a dark field, tufted with thistle and the shrunken stalks of ragwort, stood the little marshaled wood, its black points stabbing the mist like fixed bayonets.

"Well?" said he. "Are you my girl or aren't you?"

"Oh, don't. You'll make me cry again. You don't need me to tell you anything more."

"Come, then."

Under the boughs there was a faint resinous fragrance. The wood seemed to hang in some forgotten limbo, out of time and space. "I suppose we can't stay here for ever," murmured Valentine. "But I wish we could."

"Do you? So do I."

"There's nothing better than this," she went on after a long pause, as they lay enfolded. "It's what all the world wants and hardly any one ever seems to find."

He tilted her face towards him. "Sensual little thing. You're a born lover."

"Well, so are you. I wonder what time it is?"

"What will they say to you?"

"I don't care."

They dissolved into kisses and silence. The mist above the pointed trees began to thicken and darken. Francis stretched himself lazily. "We must go, I suppose." Neither of them moved.

"Do you see this?" he said presently. She leaned over on one elbow, and looked. A fallen fir-cone on the ground beside them had been half-stripped, and lay surrounded by husks like tawny petals.

"At first I thought it was mice that did it," he continued. "But now I believe it's squirrels. I think they tear off the husks and nibble a piece out of the bottom of each. You find fir-cones like this all about the woods."

"How human," she cried. "Just like globe-artichokes."

Now the mist was turning to rain; drops spattered through the dark fronds above them. At last they rose to go.

"Pine-needles in my hair this time," she said. "Mrs. Namble is a witch!"

He picked them out, holding her embraced. They walked across the tufted field in the half-dark and stood in the wet road, hardly able to part.

"You'll get damned wet with that open neck," he observed. "Can't you button it up?"

"No. Got no button."

"Haven't you a brooch, then? Or a pin?"

"No."

"Lord, what a helpless little thing it is." He moved to the hedge and cut a long thorn. "Come here then."

He pinned up her coat with it, close under her chin. Drops fell from the half-denuded elms above them. He bent and kissed her; his lips tasted of rain. "You don't want a man, you want a nursemaid."

"No, no," she cried, radiant, burning in the misty gloom.

"I only want you—always, for ever. Oh, my love, it won't last for ever, will it?"

"It will last as long as we want it to," he said.

* * * * *

Ever since breakfast they had been wrangling. Mrs. Spens senior sat in an armchair on one side of the hearth, patching Humphrey's pajamas, and her daughter sat in an armchair on the opposite side darning Humphrey's socks. Valentine was pretending to be called away on one domestic errand or another, but curiosity brought her back again and again to see how the dispute was advancing. The orgy of reparation was doubtless directed at her, but at present the surface of unflawed serenity which she was able to present to the world sent such bullets bouncing harmlessly back like indiarubber balls, and armored her old fear of the Spens coldness and clannishness.

"Though really, Valentine, these pajamas are in a disgraceful state," complained her mother-in-law. "If the laundry is so rough on them it would be better to have the washing done at home."

Valentine was just about to declare that Humphrey's pajamas were no concern of hers when she thought better of it. Still, the spectacle of three females hobnobbing over a man's pants and vests seemed to her curiously indecent. But then the argument broke out again, like a fire, in a new place. How was Mabel's day in town to be arranged? If she were to change at the Varleys for dinner and a theater at half-past six, would six o'clock be time enough for . . . "Yes, but then there's the concert in the afternoon, and when am I to see my dentist? Anyway, I can't get up until ten even if I go by Humphrey's train . . .

and then I must get the stockings to match . . . and if I'm to get to Sloane Street . . ."

So it plodded on. It had plodded on for hours already, without perceptible progress.

"Well, why not leave out the dentist and the dressmaker until you go up to stay?" suggested Valentine. "After all, if you're going for the day, just to amuse yourself, why not amuse yourself?"

Both turned on her. "But can't you see . . . of course she must . . . and the alterations are *absolutely* necessary."

Murmuring some excuse, Valentine fled once more to the kitchen. The heavy self-important touch on trifles was heavy also on her spirit. She thought of similar discussions conducted with Sikey and Jane, and their adorable touches of self-mockery. This leaden Northern seriousness, how she hated it. From his place beside the hearth, Minx got up, stretching and yawning; he jumped on a chair and pushed against her hand with a caressing little crow of salutation.

"Oh, Minx, Minx, they're such suety people," she whispered to him. "Wrap up warm and be sure you have plenty to eat and be ever so careful how you invest your money and don't catch cold. Oh, Minkey, my cat, I'd sooner be you, with your little crow of love when somebody comes in that you like, and your disgusting Bacchanalia with dismembered mice. You're really more alive than they are." She brooded on their fussy conservation of physical existence as an end in itself. They knew the body as the beginning of cares but not as the beginning of joys.

"Oh, there you are," exclaimed Mabel Spens, popping a lean discontented face round the kitchen door. "I really don't think it's much use trying to mend these socks;

they're too far gone. They'd better be used for floor-cloths or something."

Valentine, who had been sitting by the fire with Minx on her knee, scrambled up, shamefaced as a child. To be caught nursing the cat in the kitchen while her husband's family mended his clothing in the sitting-room was really an appalling situation. But Mabel was not looking at her; her housewifely eye had pounced on some fillets of fish that lay on a plate on the dresser.

"Shall I put these in the larder? What were you going to do with them?" she solicited.

"Oh, no, I'll do that. Fry 'em, I suppose." Valentine was vague, wondering what the right reply could be.

"Cook has an awfully good way of doing them at home," said her sister-in-law, standing gravely with the plate in her hand. "You just . . . and then you . . . grease the dish, of course . . . and then a good anchovy sauce poured over at the last minute. Naturally they take longer to bake, but it does make them a little less monotonous."

"I'll remember that," said Valentine. "Liar!" said her mind. "Did you decide what to do about tomorrow?" she added.

"Well, you see, I can't think whether to . . ." and the whole arguments were set forth anew.

A head peered in. "Oh, there you are," said Mrs. Spens. She crossed over to the window and peered out of it with her white shrewish face. "I shouldn't have thought it did the tea-cloths any good to be hung outside on the line in all this rain, my dear."

Valentine flushed with the sudden knowledge of a chain of causality. Tea-cloths hanging in the rain and unmended pajamas and a lover up on Heron Hill: it was, as they say, "all of a piece."

"I'll go and fetch them in at once," she said awkwardly. "I expect Lily's forgotten them."

"A servant needs an eye kept on her continually if she's to be trained to be any good," averred Mrs. Spens. "And nothing will ever be done satisfactorily if you hesitate to find fault. But *not* in those thin shoes, my dear Valentine, the yard is full of puddles."

However, she had already run out into the rain and was unpegging the cloths. *"You'll die, you'll die, Rendel, my son,"* she apostrophized herself. But when the two women were safely settled again in the sitting-room she could not bear their presence; back she came into the kitchen to help Lily with lunch. The little woman looked cowed and harassed.

"What's the matter, Lily?"

Slow tears filled the devoted brown eyes.

"Lily, what is it? Tell me."

She plucked at her apron. "I can't seem to do nothing right, m'm."

"Never mind, Lily. Don't take any notice. It'll all be over in a few days." Valentine patted her shoulder and a flood of sobs came over the little woman.

"You see, m'm," she stammered, "I'm not used to it, living with you. I'd forgotten how it felt, to have people always picking at you like. And they seem such cold hard people. I keep fancying you like a little butterfly among a lot of gravestones."

Valentine looked nervously at the door. It was an appallingly improper conversation to hold with one's domestic, and it needed so very little before she could mingle her tears with Lily's. Even the Spens helpfulness was about as welcome as a snowstorm in May and very little warmer in intent. Candor vanquished propriety.

"Lily, don't cry. I hate 'em myself. They're a couple of nagging old bitches. But they'll be gone soon. It will all pass."

She crept upstairs to her own room, full of revolt.

"Most unseasonable, madam," said Slinger the butcher.

"But so lovely," protested Valentine. It was sad that Slinger the butcher couldn't be persuaded to take off his fixed labels and enjoy November's caprices. It seemed now as though the year would never stop blooming. Day after day the berries in the hedges and the woods—not only hips and haws, but barberry, holly, whitebeam, and the flat heads of the wayfaring tree, burned like the last blossoms of departed summer. The skies were faint as a hazy sea. But inside Slinger's shop there were only carcases and petunia-colored slabs of flesh; the air smelt of sawdust and dried blood. Drawn apart, away from herself and from Robert Blair's housekeeper and the cook from The Croft, two old brown tramp-women in feathered hats and dusty coats bursting at the seams waited while Slinger's important customers were served, standing like two meek patient beasts until their turn should come. They were subdued to the very hue of the earth. "Eh, Ah'm fair fagged ait," muttered one. "Traipsin' athirt they 'oods, and never a haise to give ye a sup of wahter. We'm best get back to Ahxford."

Valentine regarded them. "We're fellow-Ishmaelites, though you don't recognize me. We've put ourselves outside the normal scheme, you and I: we've let loose our hold on money or respectability or getting on in the world; all we care about is to slip through the interstices of society and go our own way. I don't belong to this settled world, padded with servants and unearned incomes: I belong to you." A fantastic longing possessed her to approach them.

"Then you'll send up the joint at once?" she asked fat Slinger, noting that the thready veins in his cheeks were petunia like the meat he sold.

"Certainly, madam, certainly."

She turned timidly to the weathered old women, afraid of a rebuff, afraid of making herself ridiculous in the village shop, but contemptuous of her own fears.

"How are you going to get to Oxford? It's miles from here. Would—would the bus fare be any help to you?" She felt hideously ashamed; her heart cried out, "Don't think I'm different; don't think I'm patronizing. We're the same."

They both gave her the slow full look of dumb animals. "Aye, lass, if ye can spare it."

She took some coins from her purse and hurried away, utterly abashed, into the soft-bloomed morning. A trend of thought rose in her mind.

"That was the housekeeping money. I haven't got any money of my own. If I wanted to go to London, if things got too much, I shouldn't even have the train fare of my own. I'm almost a prisoner. What a conceited fool I've been all these years, not to see that money *matters*. Except to be sorry that Humphrey had an attitude of meanness, I've never thought twice about it. Well, I ought to have thought twice. Oh, dear, I am full of folly: there is no arithmetic in me."

Instead of turning in at the gate she walked slowly on along the hill road, deep in thought. What were these two men asking of her? Humphrey wanted her partly as an organizer and partly as a garnish (a sort of sprig of parsley, she fancied) to set in order and to enhance his home and his otherwise lonely life, in return for which he guaranteed her board and lodging and the occasional clothes which economy could wring out of the housekeeping. To Francis, on the other hand, she was for the moment the breath of life, just as he was to her. And that relation must be inviolate, kept far apart from the soil and sordidness of economics. To be his joy she must not be his dependent: to eclipse that wild and lovely flame of animal life with dull human responsibility was what she could not, must not do. At all costs he must be free; she dared not spoil the subtle quality he possessed by trying to make him other than he was. But her thoughts were dissipated on a sudden wind of longing for him, and the underlying economic problem (like the skeleton, sinister, subcutaneous, that gives the human body its form and structure) was forgotten in the shining veils imagination draped about it.

* * * * *

"What an obstinate young woman you are," said Humphrey. He had just called for Jane at her office in Gower Street and she had firmly refused, in one of those bursts of independence that characterized their group, to be taken out to a meal.

"I'm going to one of the horrid little places I always go to," she had replied to his suggestion that she should lunch with him, "and you can come with me if you like." It was a defensive move against interrogation which she might find difficult to parry. And Humphrey was inclined to agree that it certainly was a horrid little place. Knots of serious young women and a sprinkling of worn old gentlemen sat huddled for lunch at unsteady tables two feet by four, whose highly polished surfaces were decorated with raffia mats and glass jugs of cloudy water. By the door there was a green baize board crowded with notices of rooms to let, of French lessons given and required, of palmists, astrologers, and home-made jams. They ordered their meal. Half-way through it Humphrey plunged.

"I suppose you know about this new development, this antic of Valentine's?"

"Um," said Jane, shaking pepper out of the crest of a coquettish china bird.

"Do you approve?" he said. He looked at her quite kindly, for, like every one else, he was fond of Jane.

The little person opposite him looked reflective. "How can I say, Humphrey? It's difficult to blame any one. I think it's a pity, but I can see that she feels it inevitable. And I can see that you've got into a position you didn't expect and can't possibly like."

"Well," said Humphrey, "what's to happen? What's to become of us all?" He gave the tangle wearily into her hands. It occurred to him that she was the only young woman he knew who did not antagonize him, and he wondered dimly why he had not married her instead of Valentine.

The little oracle looked at a loss. Absorbedly she watched an ageing lady at a neighboring table, hung with dangling ear-rings of old silver and three ropes of pearls, who was pouring her coffee into her saucer and back again. She ordered sardines and shared them with the cat.

"It's all very involved," she submitted at last. "It's hardly a situation that comes within the ordinary rules, is it? But if Valentine wants you to divorce her I think you should do so without wasting any more time. The longer it goes on the more difficult it will be."

"But don't you see," he said moodily, "that I don't *want* to divorce her. Now that she knows she's free I want her to give this man up. I've no doubt she finds woodland life all very romantic—for a week or two. But that sort of thing doesn't last. Even Val, with all her love of a new sensation, must see that in time. But why can't she see it now?"

Jane considered. "Do you love Valentine, Humphrey? I mean, really love her?"

"She's my wife. Of course I do. I'm sick of this other nonsense."

What gentle little movements the girl had. Why hadn't he married her and been saved all this bother? "Besides," he added, "I don't even know whether I could divorce her now. She's got nothing in writing, it's true." A longing for comfort and convenience and the easy ways of normal life came over him. Almost he felt inclined to ask Jane whether she would marry him if he divorced Valentine. But he did not dare. However, the idea brought back a flash of long-quenched whimsicality. "The King's Proctor is such a difficult fellow, I've always heard. And absolutely devoid of the slightest sense of honor. He listens at doors and behind hedges to private conversations. Jane," he pointed out an old man with a distinguished nose, who was sitting, in a celluloid collar, beside a tea-pot and a newspaper parcel neatly tied with colored string, "do you think that is perhaps the King's Proctor? In disguise, of course."

"He looks extraordinarily like one," said Jane with a gravity suited to the august subject of their conversation. At the corner of Bedford Square they parted. The Hampstead heights were a blue mound closing in the long trough of the street.

"Of course," said the oracle, "your theories of freedom have let you in for this, and so your divorce would be a piece of collusion anyway. But it won't be so bad if you stop shilly-shallying and decide on it now than if you make up your mind to it later on."

"I'm afraid you haven't understood my attitude," he said coldly. "I want her to stay with me; I don't want to be by myself. And I'm not in the least afraid of this fellow as a rival."

"But your only weapon is to threaten divorce, and yet you know that that won't make her give him up," countered Jane. "Well, I don't see what choice you have except to wait and see whether it will blow over."

He shuffled the toe of his shoe along a ridge in the pavement. "Can't *you* make her see reason?"

"Reason? My dear Humphrey, what's reason? Valentine has had the fortune or misfortune to fall genuinely in love, and I imagine she'll do very much what Francis Merryweather wants her to do. The only basis on which the present state of things is stable is that he's satisfied with it."

Miserably he looked away to Hampstead, knowing that he suffered from a divided mind. On the one side there was fear of loneliness, of ridicule, of the possible consequences of his own curious position if he stood out for divorce; on the other, anger against his wife because he had not been able to keep her loyalty and had not known he wanted it until it was too late. Justice told him that he had brought it all upon himself, self-pity urged that she had taken a treacherous advantage of him. He was between Scylla and Charybdis indeed, and yet he couldn't stay still, though movement in whatever direction meant torture or fresh disaster. A demon of honesty plagued him. "You know you didn't want Valentine until you saw some one else wanting her. You know you only want her now because she's madly in love with another man." But then the other demons of resentment, possessiveness and fear brought their tweaking pincers once more to his writhing mind. "She's my wife: I can't be left alone. She owes me faithfulness." He tossed like a sick man upon a bed of stones, paining himself at every movement. There was no attitude in which he could find rest.

Was it possible to rebuild it again? He felt confused and at a disadvantage, that disadvantage of one who must wait upon the reactions of another before committing himself. There she sat by the fire reading, as she had sat for two winters past without causing a ripple of perturbation on the surface of his mind. Now he had stumbled into her power; he had to defer and be humble, and it went against everything he was. How much lovelier she had become in the last month or two; every curve softened, her face with that betraying bloom upon it. No one could look at her and not know that she was happily, radiantly in love. Why in God's name had he not kept her to himself?

"Well?" she said, lazy, indifferent.

Couldn't he woo her back with the old whimsical touch that had first made her laugh and love him? He fumbled after it, as a man long cut off from music will ramble with stiffened fingers over the piano, hearing in his head a melody he cannot reproduce.

"Here's the China tea you expected, and here's a present you didn't expect."

"Oh? A present?" There was more surprise than pleasure in her voice.

"Yes. A record. Nothing at all fashionable. Only you don't happen to have it and I know you used to have a suppressed passion for it. Debussy's 'Afternoon on the Phone.' "

It was the sort of absurdity that would have made her trill with laughter once, but she barely smiled.

"That was very nice of you, Humphrey. Blair rang up just before you came in, to say he was coming over to-night."

She returned to her book. Well, it was—curious, he supposed, that this girl who for two years had exasperated him with her tears and her excessive vulnerability should now be shut away from him like a creature of stone. But he tried again, aware that he must seem clumsy and foolish.

"I like that frock. Is it new? Are they pretense or real, those buttons all the way down the front? Do you remember when I used to say you were made in two halves, like a cheap bottle, and you used to call it the mechanomorphic school of love-making?"

The vagueness of her glance lacerated him. The whole of her life was drawn away, concentrated elsewhere: his sway over her was at an end. But she was his house-mate still; his will was set against letting her go.

"When this is all over," he said at last, "we must go for a long holiday together; to Spain, perhaps, or Sicily."

The hand tightened that lay on the arm of the chair. "Don't talk of the future like that. It's as if I were to say, 'I shall do so-and-so when Francis is dead.' "

"But you can't expect it to be like that for me," he expostulated. "To me it is, 'I shall do so-and-so when the war is over.' "

After dinner she stole out and left them. Moonlight was exaggerating the black and white of the night world outside. It had been an exquisite month: days of amber and nights of pearl. Now there was a frosty nip in the air; the grasses were stiff as spears under the hedge. In spite of the moon outside, now a few days beyond the full, she had brought out an electric torch which threw a gold shaft of light across the road in front of her. At the foot of Radnor Hill it became clear in her mind that she had intended all the evening to go to Francis.

"It will be after midnight before I get there," she reflected. "The moon will be setting by then. Lucky I brought the torch."

The life of the hills seemed held in leash by the frost; it was very cold and still on the high road. Slow-falling leaves in the night drifted across the glare of the lamp like golden moths. At last the long miles were done; the woods of Heron Hill stood black about her, almost unlit by the westering moon. A shrewmouse darted across the path, and from the thicket below the clearing came the sharp barking of the owls.

She went softly into the hut and lit a candle. Francis lay asleep in the bare little room with the whitewashed walls. Cold and comfortless it was, yet she found it significant and beautiful. An apple and a book lay on the table beside the bed. Shading the candle with her hand, she peered down at him. Seen thus asleep and foreshortened, his face looked wizened and faintly malicious, like that of a handsome devil a little faded. A knot of black hair curled over his brow. She set down the candle and began to undress. Presently he opened his eyes.

"You? How did you get here?"

"Walked, of course."

"Marvelous girl. Come, let me touch you."

"Listen, what's that?" Three sharp yaps ripped out into the frosty night.

"A fox." He held out his arms, and she sat down on the side of the bed and pushed off her shoes, with the movement of a fly shuffling its legs.

"Did you think I'd come tonight?"

He circled her shoulders with a chain of kisses. "Yes, somehow I felt you would. But after eleven it seemed impossible, so I went to bed."

"And are you glad?" she asked childishly.

"Oh, you know, you know."

She took his hand and looked at it, half-dreaming, half-intent, as though it were a flower which at once she savored and sought to assign to its class. It was slight and facile; the harsh skin wrinkled into a mesh of lines across the knuckles. The old sort of surface consciousness, witty and full of quick shallow apprehensions, told her there were things she did not care for in this hand. She thought of hands painted by Rembrandt, which expressed humility and ancient wisdom; of the subtle, spiritualized hands of Lionardo; they illuminated nothing here; the hand she held was merely clever, clever and old. Then the light of critical perception flickered, dimmed and was quenched as in a passion of tenderness and hopeless love she lifted it to her lips.

* * * * *

It was too lovely, too perfect. The golden fruit of the Hesperides lay in her arms and she trembled to possess it. Her bliss had gone beyond the rights of mortals and robbed heaven of all its meaning. "Heaven, what's that? A fantasy. Heaven is here and now on Heron Hill. Heaven is a reality of this earth or it's nothing." But what in that case came after heaven? Each time the question recurred to plague her, her mind doubled back and refused to face it. To placate Humphrey and to keep their lovers' paradise unflawed was all her preoccupation, and the future could very well be left to its own account. Take care of the days and the years will take care of themselves.

"But what," Jane had asked her gravely on one of her rare visits, "do you really think you're doing?"

Valentine paused, a little troubled. "I'm—what *am* I doing? I'm being alive in a half-dead world. Tobogganing gayly down to perdition, no doubt you think. But really I'm making up for lost time. Like Proust."

"Proust?"

"Well, if *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* doesn't mean making up for lost time, I don't know what it does mean."

Mockery still stayed to her hand, a weapon of defense for the citadel of delight. But as day succeeded day and a frozen Christmas was obliterated by the milder airs of January, with flecks of gold in the furze and the fat thumbs of wild arum under the hedges, a ghostly anxiety stirred and grew. At first she did not know what it was and refused to examine it, as though by ignoring its presence she could make it pass. But as it grew more perceptible she countered it by ridicule; it must be the faint survival of a Puritan conscience, unnecessary and yet tiresome as one's appendix, a vestigial remain. But at last after long evasion she was obliged to recognize and reckon with it. The truth was that she had sold herself to happiness: happiness —this bliss of life with Francis—was dearer to her than honor or peace of heart or perhaps even than Francis himself. With a growing dismay she began to watch her own enslavement. It was a terrible thing on which to concentrate one's powers, she dimly knew, this preservation of personal joy. It might even be a relief in the end to let go for ever of that conception of happiness. In the distance no doubt it glittered, but when you encountered it more closely you saw that it was the glitter of fetters and not of the gate of paradise. What a slavery to bind one's life to, the pursuit of happiness. *O how weak and weary I Underneath my myrtle lie.*

"When are you going to get your workshop?" she forced herself to ask Francis one day. Perhaps if he were working, things would be calmer in her again, less tremulous with self-accusation than they had been for the past month or more. And yet she dreaded the slightest change in their situation as though it menaced the very roots of their lives.

"There'll be an outhouse up at Coulter's Farm, they say they can let me have at Lady Day," he said reluctantly, as though he had guessed her feelings. "I might have taken it at Christmas," he added, "but I thought we'd have the early spring together. And after all it's not going to separate us, my love."

Rebellion flared in her mind at the thought of her two fidelities. To keep faith with Humphrey had meant, as things stood, to stand by him in keeping up appearances, those appearances which seemed to mean so much more to him than the contradictory reality beneath; to keep faith with Francis meant to give him no burden of responsibility to bear. And she was perfectly aware that she deluded Humphrey, by the strength of her present position, into the belief that she herself was strong, invulnerably secure; just as the overpowering joy which Francis by his mere presence gave her misled him into supposing she had no conflicts to face. It was that joy which deceived Valentine herself into forgetting just how precarious was her way of life. Blankly at moments she realized that between them they held the power to destroy her utterly, but the thought of Francis held always its vitalizing potency which renewed her strength and kept fear and mistrust at bay. "It's worth it, that's all," was the sum of her conclusion after hours of analysis. Besides, wasn't she deeply aware that there were no ways to make love safe? It was a risk beyond all calculation and she must be content to take her chance.

"Do you think love's immoral?" she said to him as they stood delaying their farewells at the head of the muddy footpath that led down into the plain from Heron Hill, one afternoon in late January. The year was still lying in that deathly trough that comes at the fag-end of winter: moss and lichen were bright, green-gleaming in the woods, but it was the brightness of upholstery and not of new life, whose only signs as yet were in the starfish plants of wild hyacinth that spread among the dead leaves.

He grinned. "Love and war are both immoral, necessarily and not incidentally like business or politics, and it's no use trying to pretend they're moral. As you do."

"Do I?"

"Certainly you do. You get a particular gratification out of our love, and therefore you must make believe to yourself that it overrides all codes by its own right. Because it's violent you think it's virtuous." He put an arm about her shoulders. "Of course it's immoral. There's no decency in love." Again a grin flitted across his face. "And that in a decent, law-abiding, respectable world is half its charm. Come, kiss me."

"No, Francis, don't. There's a man coming up the path."

"I don't care if there's a hundred men."

"Francis, I mean it. Let me go. It's old Furnivall who works over at the Rectory at Radnor End. I know him quite well."

"Pah, think I care?"

He embraced her suddenly, violently. Scarlet and angry, she waited while the man passed by with his heavy gait, as though he moved perpetually through deep mud.

"How can you? You're hateful, selfish and hateful. Do you think it's fair to behave like that in front of a man who'll go chattering round all the pubs? How pleasant for Humphrey to get it from Blair that I was seen being kissed by some man up on Heron Hill! The least I can do is to prevent the village from gossiping if I can. Oh, I can't stay here talking to you; you make me too angry." And she ran off down the hill in a fury.

"You needn't come back in a hurry," he called after her, but she did not answer.

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Jane had come down for the week-end into the sullen country and at once they set off for a long walk. The wet road ran like a streak of silver between sepia hedges. Out in the plain (for Valentine was avoiding the hill roads) a flock of sheep meandered; among them were a few tottering week-old lambs, their legs describing a parabola, their thin bodies propped shakily on the top of the curve. There was not a shoot visible in the hedges; the damp fields and dark woods were empty of any spark of life. The two girls walked fast and silently for the first mile or so.

"How's Sikey?" threw out Valentine at last.

"Discontented. Full of curious information. She's not coming back till the summer, she says."

On they went, silent again.

"Well, how is it going?" invited Jane.

Valentine looked sulky at once. "Sometimes I wish it had never begun. I love him but I don't like him; there's the trouble. It's all so *violent*. I wish we could be calmer. I love him so much that I'm torn to bits with fear. And then he does some stupid little thing that annoys me and then I rage, and then, where is our lovely love?"

She reflected for a while and then went on. "It's too much a conspiracy to pursue delight. I believe that that sort of conspiracy in the end defeats love itself. It's as though I were trying to skim off the cream of experience, and that makes me feel mean. Of course it's a sentimentalist's dream, I know, but I wish he and I could have been first lovers to each other."

"Couldn't you go to him altogether?"

"No. That's just what he doesn't want. I begin to understand him better since"—she gave a derisive twitter of laughter—"since our last quarrel. To feel happy about our relationship, you see, I have to think that it is in some ultimate way right. But he can't enjoy it unless he thinks it wrong. To do what he feels he ought not to be doing gives him the real, authentic thrill."

"That sounds about as bad as it could be."

"Oh, don't say that," breathed Valentine, a half-sleepy, half-wanton look suddenly dawning in her eyes, "don't say that, because in a way I understand it. In a way we're the same. There is some little hidden evil corner of me that understands him, absolutely. So perhaps really it's all right."

They paused in the road. A row of elms and a five-barred gate scarred with black the watery day. The fields were sodden and melancholy, like the banks of Lethe. One might have expected the river of shades to run just beyond the mist.

"But," said Jane, grave and almost sibylline, "will it be all right *in the end?"*

"In the end? What end? Oh, darling, don't ask me such hateful questions. There'll come a calm at the last, I know. Time will befriend our passions though not our faces."

After all, she was inclined to slide down the tide of life and trust that it would bring her into some desired harbor. Why then this terror of being duped? "Besides," she continued, "in this world there are no absolute values. If temporary happiness is to be found in romantic illusion, in religion, in growing cabbages, there's no deception: God is not mocked."

Jane, however, had the last word. "It has always surprised me," she said in a small meditative voice, "to see the amount of suffering people are willing to inflict on themselves for the sake of leading disorderly lives." And the walk continued in silence.

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Valentine pounced on the letters that lay beside her plate. In the beloved handwriting, nothing. A sick despair invaded her heart. For five days she had sat out in the plain chewing over her stubborn pride, and for five days Francis had presumably been chewing his up on the hill. Which of them was going to outlast the other?

"This is simply childish," said a part of her mind. "Damned if I'll be the first to make a move," retorted another part. Meanwhile the old refrain, "I love him; I don't like him. I love him; I don't like him," accompanied the argument as regularly as a clock's tick.

"Bacon and eggs?" said Humphrey, lifting the dish-cover.

"No, thanks."

"What are you going to have, then?"

"Nothing. Don't bother. A cup of coffee."

He looked at her with attention. "Look here, you can't go on like this. What's the matter? You eat like a sparrow and there are black rings round your eyes. What on earth is it all about? Things going wrong between you and that fellow?"

Like a flash she saw him rejoicing, comforting her, making her pain his opportunity. "No."

"Well, if this goes on I shall send you away for a holiday. You look like a ghost of yourself."

After he had gone she ran to the glass. It was true; these five short days had cruelly impaired her bloom. Their lovers' quarrels gave her each time a foretaste of some final anguish that seemed already known to her, as though *over-busy remembrance, remembrance, restless remembrance* were presenting it to her mind as a recollection of sorrow experienced far back. Well, there was the morning to be endured, and then a renewal of hope when the midday post should come. She walked out into the road and stood looking towards the hills. The morning was clear as glass; blue shadows lay on the tarred road and on the white sheets hung out to dry at the bottom of the garden. It was bitterly cold, but the world was magic as though it lay in the center of an opal. If he loved her indeed he would surely come to see her today. Or she would toss away her pride and go to him. Yes, but did he want her? Already she had inklings that her love far outran his own.

"There are times," she brooded, "when I'd turn back the wheel, when I'd like never to have loved him, never to have known him at all. There's no rest in loving a creature that's half an animal. I used to think it was one of his charms, but now I can only see its danger to myself. If only we could love and live in peace together—but we can't, ever. Not all our will can create peace between us: the thing's like a fire of straw; it will rage and rage, and then, suddenly, it'll be gone. Or with luck it'll be gone," she corrected herself. "But perhaps it will flare and smolder, and flare again, till the very end; until we're *led to grave in marbill stone.*"

She paced up and down the road, lost in thought. Frost had furred the banks like a layer of white plush and had tinseled the straws that lay in the road. She kicked at them idly, so unaware of the outer world that when a voice hailed her, her heart almost stopped. Faint with joy, she was gathered into the man's arms.

"Little fiend, little devil," he murmured caressingly. "Why didn't you write? Why didn't you come? All this eternal blasted week I've waited for you." Then, as she clung to him, "Ah, you don't mind now who sees us!"

Tenderly she touched his face; it had never seemed more beautiful to her. "Dear love, why can't we give each other greater peace?"

His dark gaze answered hers. "I mistrust your love of me, but I never doubt my own. And yet that's just what *you* mistrust. Come back to Heron Hill, my darling, and forget it all."

Before night fell beyond the clearing it was already forgotten. Enraptured she gazed upon him as he sat in a bright green cardigan by the little stove smoking his pipe, black hair tossed and brown eyes bright and cunning as a squirrel's.

"I adore you," she whispered, low as though the wood outside were full of unseen listeners. "You'll never know how I adore you. All the silly things you do are precious to me, down to the way you have of twisting that lock of hair into a knot on your forehead and stroking the grain. Down to your perfectly loathsome habits of boiling eggs in the kettle and scalding out the milk-can with dirty washing-up water." She nuzzled her face against his as he burst into a great guffaw of laughter.

"Well, you've a rum way of expressing your passions, old man. And what do you suppose I think about you?"

"That I can't guess."

"God, you insatiable little monster, am I to prove it to you all over again?"

"All over again. For ever and ever. I could make love to you and be made love to again to all eternity and never tire."

He grinned. "I believe you could."

Suddenly the frost was over, the wind stilled, March broke fair with a burst of summer sun. All day the clearing rang with the note of blackbird and thrush, their flutings cherished and prolonged by the fine clearness of the air. The tops of the elms were thickening; the beech-boughs reddened towards spring, and the ruff of dead leaves that clung to their lowest branches glinted like burnished copper in the light. Still Valentine lingered on the hill. Three days, four days, and yet she could not go. All too late into the spring morning she would dart from the house, wrapped only in a large rough towel, and wash in an old zinc bath under the trees in a sunny thicket, while he wandered about in his yellow pajamas, sweeping out the house and making a fire of twigs at the edge of the cornfield that lay the other side of the hedge.

"Fire burning?" she called.

"Yes, it's burning. Shall we have breakfast out of doors?" He came towards her as she stood, naked and new-washed, under the budded trees. "Shall we, you little savage?"

They surveyed each other with the pride of wild things in their flawless health and swift-running physical life.

Down the air to a whitened tree-stump near by sailed a jay; he made a bad-tempered remark and flapped resplendently off again.

"Christ, see his wing, the gorgeous brute!" cried Francis. He stared delightedly after the bird, lost for the moment to all but that colored flight into the March heavens.

"That's what I love about you too," murmured the girl, stretching herself in the sunlight. "The way you become the thing you look at. Just for the minute you actually *were* that jay. Other people gape like trippers and throw a stone or a bottle, with their minds if not their hands. Oh, lovely, lovely Francis!"

" 'Struth, how you talk!" He stopped her lips with kisses. "Now be off with you and get into your clothes, or it'll be noon before we have our early cup of tea." But still she delayed, entranced, running her fingers through his hair.

"How everything smells of spring. I wish the between-seasons would stay for ever. Winter and summer are too much like things achieved and finished. What I love is speculation and hope."

He picked her up in his arms. "I shall have to carry you in, that's clear. I believe you'd stay talking till sunset, without ever a stitch on you."

But when he had set her down inside the house she clung to his arms.

"Francis, we do belong, don't we?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Then, my darling, don't let me go. Promise you'll never, never let me go."

Mockingly he teased her breasts. "How should I keep you? You'll go if you want to."

She tossed back her fair hair, pleading with him. "Oh, Francis, don't let me go. I know how it is; I know how it'll be. We'll be together if you want it and not unless."

"You curious little being." He smiled into her eyes with the bright dark look of the woodland creature. "I have no possible doubt that I shall go on loving you long after you have forgotten me."

But even as his glance sought hers she turned away trying to penetrate the future. "Ah, Francis, if I thought that I should rest in my grave in peace."

His laugh shouted through the little room. "Now what does that mean, my foolish little image? Nothing, nothing, nothing."

She was silent, gazing out of the window. The western stretch of sky was obscured with a drift of cloud; its shadow blotched the plain. A slight shiver ran over her as though the sunny mood were faintly clouded too.

* * * * *

The attic smelt of apples and mice. Its tiny leaded window was hung with cobwebs, and a hole in the floor, frayed round with dusty splinters, confirmed the tale of neglect. Valentine knelt beside a battered leather suitcase, turning over papers. How pathetic neglected rooms were, through which the current of life had ceased to flow. No one had been in the attic for months, and it was stagnant as a pool at the end of a dry summer. Apathetically she continued her search. Intuition had forced her to it, and she had the habit of listening to her intuitions, but really she felt fretful and dull. In herself she hadn't wanted to come up to the attic at all. That meant, presumably, that something not herself had obliged her to it. Fatigue and annoyance divided her mind. She picked up a letter that lay on the floor beside her and read the first paragraph again.

This morning as I lay in bed, quarreling with the world because you were not with me, I caught the glint of something on the blanket. It was a thread of your golden hair. I laid it on the table and put a matchbox over it. But afterwards I forgot about it and it was brushed away.

A few hours earlier she had thought it charming, but now she looked at it with the cursory, appraising glance of one who runs his eye over an account or an inventory. Then she turned once more to the suitcase full of papers, with their worn folds and faded ink. Here it was; a letter dated some three years back.

Dear Bits,—Tonight when I got home I found a hair lying on my waistcoat, just above the heart. Yours. I picked it off and held it cautiously over the waste-paper basket. But that seemed such heartless treatment that I put it back where I found it.

A rueful grin came over her face, but without dissipating the cloud of distress that had settled there before her search began.

"If I were Sikey," she thought, "I should laugh like anything. I should make a lot of ribald jokes about my molting habits. I should pooh-pooh it all, blow it away like thistledown. *Nothing; the autumn fall of hair, The whole year sets apace.* If I were Jane it could never happen twice, because Jane is like that. But being myself, I'm midway between them. It seems to me funny and also it seems to me not funny in the least. It seems as though the past had taken a revenge on the future—the future that's now the present—as though Humphrey were somehow laughing at Francis."

Suddenly her eyes brimmed with tears. "It's all wrong for me; it ought not to have happened like this. I hate the past. It's Francis I love. I ought to have been a single-hearted person."

A common-sense wave of consciousness reassured her. "You're tired and overstrung just now. Your mind is befooled with shadows, exaggerating everything; there's nothing really there at all." But another self despised that common sense, and the fancy that Humphrey had somehow robbed Francis as well as Francis Humphrey lay like a thorn in her mind. "Humphrey destroyed a sort of faith which it isn't in me to give again. If Francis and I can't make a real relation but can only enjoy ourselves, that failure comes home to roost on Humphrey's doorstep."

She went slowly downstairs and into the sitting-room. Its sun-flooded look and the soft throats of the daffodils in the stone jar soothed her like a caress. She moved about the room, shaking out the cushions, setting in order the pile of music beside the piano. The empty waste-paper basket caught at her attention, and she moved to ring the bell.

"Lily, I left a lot of things on the top of the waste-paper basket this morning when I was tidying the cupboard. Do you know where they are?"

The woman twisted her fingers awkwardly. "No, m'm, I don't. That is, I threw them into the dustbin. I didn't think you'd be wanting them again."

"But I didn't mean them to be thrown away," said Valentine, frowning. "I put them there so that they shouldn't be in the way. Why didn't you ask me?"

"I'm sure I never thought, m'm. You see, being on the top of the waste-paper basket like that, I never thought but that you didn't want them."

Valentine, her thoughts stretching with disquietude, surveyed the woman who would not meet her eyes. "But surely, Lily, you didn't throw them all away? Can't you remember what there was? I know there were several magazines and papers, but I certainly wanted to look through them again. And I'm sure there were other things."

She stopped, trying to picture the heap she had piled up. "Yes, of course. There was my big blue scarf. I hadn't seen it for weeks and then I found it in the bottom of the cupboard. You couldn't possibly have thrown that away. Why, I meant to wear it this afternoon."

The room had gone cold and evil. In Lily's motionless figure Valentine divined something twisted, something crying out in a trap.

"Go and look in the dustbin," she said evenly. "Bring me back what you find."

She sat down with a feeling of sudden weariness. The daffodils, so soft-throated a few minutes before, now mocked her like blaring trumpets. Presently Lily reappeared, flushed to the ears. She hung hesitatingly about the door.

"You see, m'm, you threw away the old telephone directory. It's last year's directory, m'm, so of course I thought they was all to be thrown away. It was the directory made me think it, m'm. That's how I didn't understand. Of course I ought to have asked you, m'm."

Agitation rose like a wave in the girl as she listened to her servant. She beat it back.

"I see. Have you brought the other things?"

Flushing ever more deeply, Lily advanced into the room and laid the directory and a number of newspapers on the table. "This—this was all I could find, m'm. I think there must 'a' been some one at the dustbin, m'm. I saw a nasty-looking man pass along the road, middle of the morning."

It was horrible to pin her down longer; she felt as though she were torturing an animal. "Then you can't find my scarf?"

"No, m'm." It was a tiny hoarse sound, barely audible, like a roughened finger rasping on silk.

"That's all then, Lily, thank you."

The door closed. She felt exhausted, devastated. A formless cloud of apprehension settled in the twilight of her mind. Lily of course was well aware that her mistress had a lover; did that fact perhaps reflect itself in a relaxing of Lily's own behavior; was the chain of causality and of human responsibility as fine and subtle as that? Do we all hand on our contacts, modified by our own strength or weakness, but otherwise much as they come to us?

Troubled in mind, she left the house and walked out into the bare spring world. Little plumes of green flared on the sweetbriar and hawthorn; the pale gold stars of the celandine peered under the stems of dog's-mercury; life was astir again. At the end of the village a boy ran out of a crude brick cottage with a Mansard roof of blue slates, and stared at her. Poor Johnny Nasher. He gazed up at her like a dog with his immense brown eyes: round his neck was the black tie with which his mother always adorned him, in mourning (Valentine fancied) for the mind that had never been born in him. Often before he had swung on the gate and stared at her, but now he began to run round her in little circles, gabbling and smiling.

"Go away, Johnny: go home, Johnny," she said sharply, as to a dog.

He faltered, still staring immensely.

"Go home," she cried again. It horrified her to see the same flushed sly look in his face that she had seen recently in Lily's. She remembered that Lily and the idiot boy's mother were cousins, but that gave her no reassurance. The whole day had a sequence of horror to which she could not find the clew. So it was in no idyllic mood that she met Francis in a grassy lane that crossed the watercress stream half a mile from Mrs. Namble's, and led away into the elm-pillared plain. But a little later the black apprehensive state was drawn up like a blind to reveal a world that was wholly charming. The lane ticked and clattered as the wind moved busily in the hedges; the blown catkins, sulphur-yellow on a backcloth of blue sky, all slanted one way.

"Like a shower of sleet, aren't they?" exclaimed Francis. "Look, the wee red flowers are coming out."

Their heads bent, enthralled, over a hazel bough; from the leaf-buds issued the tiny frayed tongues of feathery flame. Valentine went rapt and dreaming. "The little blessed lovely things. Shall we gather the nuts together in the autumn? How I love being with you, Francis. Do you know, I have the strangest feeling that you keep evil away from me."

He gathered her to him. "Oh, God, did ever any one talk so much nonsense as you do?"

As they walked along the lane arm-in-arm she told him of the incident with Lily.

"The trouble with me, you see, darling, is that my emotions are always on tap. Haven't you realized I'm that unfashionable thing, a Woman of Feeling? But obviously it's all wrong to be devastated to the soul just because a servant who professes devotion suddenly reveals a propensity for theft. Besides, perhaps she didn't thieve. Well, the dilemma is so much the worse. I'd give away the scarf and welcome, just to know whether she stole it or whether she didn't."

"But anyhow it's gone, that's the main point," said he. "So why worry about it? Can't you put it out of your head? Why go on chewing over the cud of a thing that's done with, for all practical purposes?"

"Because, you see, practical purposes don't interest me. That's where we're so hopelessly different. If that blue scarf is a symbol of a theft or a lie, or merely of an accident, it's as important to me as the whole universe that I should know which to believe it. Sometimes life opens out like a vast country before you, and sometimes it narrows down until its whole significance is knotted up with the fate of a blue scarf price nine-eleven-three at Barkers in Kensington."

"I'll give you another," he said, stroking her cheek.

She stared, drew herself apart. "You don't listen to what I say. Of course you've got far more sense than I have, but at times I feel you're a bit of an ass, all the same."

"A feeling which I thoroughly reciprocate," cried he, laughing but a little spiteful.

"Of course I'm an ass," she said indignantly. "Most of all because I try to make you see things in a way that isn't your own. I wish you could understand why I'm so worried about this thing."

He mocked her with his bright unbelieving look. "It's a great fuss about nothing. You don't understand why yourself."

"Perhaps I don't." She became vague, brooding. "Perhaps the pain is just a stiffness, a lack of elasticity in one's mind. It may come from a fixed conception that servants who love you don't also steal. This distress is only the movement of a slow brain getting used to a foreign idea.

But beyond all that, if Lily begins to steal, then it's my fault."

"Oh, Lord, worse and worse," he groaned. "Madder and madder. Come and have tea at Mrs. Namble's and forget your imaginary sorrows."

Once again she felt that she disliked him; he seemed not only a little self-satisfied, but also wooden and willful in his opposition to her. Self-satisfaction, willfulness, stupidity? At all events he would not open his mind; he was set and stubborn.

"You don't love me much today."

He turned on her with a fierce little movement. "Don't I? Ah, if I had you up on Heron Hill. That's where we understand each other."

A flicker of desire ran through her; it was as though she caught instant fire from his dark desirous gaze. Here indeed was the incontrovertible link between them. The self-will of the two human minds, irrelevant one to the other, was driven out as they filled like vessels with the flood of impersonal passion. It moved them each to each, lapped them in bright waves, annihilated their hostility as they stood there in the sharp spring sun, drinking in each other's beauty. Nor had the last waves of that same tide ebbed finally away between them when they sat down side by side at Mrs. Namble's table in the late afternoon. Every glance was a prolongation of their caresses; their faces looked bright and naked like flowers in the sun. Mrs. Namble's gaze darted from one to the other, mutely questioning, as she poured out the red-brown stream of tea into the big white cups. Their talk ranged vaguely; the bright impersonal look of passion was still upon them. It seemed that they had been caught up in a golden cloud and were still bemused, unable to find their bearings on the common earth.

"Well, you two, I hope you'll not be seen in Radnor End like that," she cried at last.

"Like what?" came Valentine's blind straying voice, long behind the challenge.

Irony played in the hazel eyes. "Like you are." But there was a faint glow in her face; they could not doubt but that it gave her pleasure to see them so. However, she released them from any obligation as guests, and began to talk for them all.

"Last week I went over to Beggarsbush Farm to measure for some covers they want done; they made me stay to tea. Gracious me, I never was in such a house in me life. Everything they had on the table, everything; you couldn't get a pin's head between the plates. And that not all. They had a jug of milk, a jug of cream, and what d'ye think, a china cow full of brandy! Tell you, me dears, I come tripping home across the fields as nimble as ninepence."

After tea Francis lit his pipe, searched in his pockets and handed her a notebook of sketches. She scrutinized it, friendly but grim.

"That your notion of a bedroom suit or whatever you call it? Oh, it's pretty, it's pretty enough. But it's a bit too high-falutin' for my taste. That's a sweet dressing-chest, now."

"Isn't it, isn't it?" He lit up like a child. "D'you see the charming detail round the jewel-drawer?"

"Aye. But call that a bedroom chair? Why, you great gaby, nobody wants a lump as big's a turnip in the middle of their spines now. What do you say, Miss Valentine? Ain't you interested in his pretty drawings?"

The girl got up and put an arm round the older woman, looking over her shoulder.

"Ain't you interested?" she repeated curiously.

"No, she's not," said Francis. "She never looks at my designs, do you, Valentine? I can't think why she won't."

She gave him a slow look. "Instinct. They're my enemy." Her eyes dropped to the drawing which Mrs. Namble held. The two diagonal pieces of the chairback were ornamented with a great Della Robbia festoon where they met.

"You're quite right about that chair, Namkin."

"Now what in the world do you know about furniture-designing?" he cried irritably.

"Nothing. Only what my bones tell me." She continued to turn over the leaves. "And they tell me without any doubt that all this is far too rococo. It's really very curious indeed."

Her mind was bent to understand; she had gone absent, she spoke not to him but to a hole in space. "None of this could possibly belong to a period later than the nineties. It's the most peculiar thing, like a madness, this passion for decoration and detail in an unrelated way. I never saw anything that belonged less to its age. There's no simplicity in it, no austerity. This is somehow furniture that hasn't been through the war."

He guffawed, but he was angry; sullenly he puffed at his pipe. "I should damn well hope it hadn't." He held out a hand for the notebook and pushed it back into his pocket. In the kitchen was a feeling as though, with an unexpected bump, the sun had set. Mrs. Namble put the plates and cups together and carried them out into the scullery on an enamel tray.

"You shouldn't 'a' said that to him about the war," she admonished the girl as she handed her the crockery to dry.

"He's got more years on his back than you have by a good many. But you're happy with him, ain't you?"

Valentine nodded.

"Aye, you both look as pleased over one another as a dog with two tails. Ah, well, the older the tea the sweeter the brew, they say."

At the stile beside the footpath to Heron Hill they separated. Twilight was already deepening; the evening was sweet with the smell of new-turned earth, and a blackbird's whistle rang though the still sharp air. A couple of fields away, the smoke from Mrs. Namble's chimney rose up straight as a rod.

"When are you coming to me again?" he said.

"When you like. I'll come whenever you want me."

"Always?"

"Always. All my life." She stared at him, full of wonder, and then gazed past him into the spring heavens. Orion was straddling the sky to the south. "Francis, I shall remember always that we've shared the loveliest thing on earth. I shall be grateful to you as long as I live, for giving me this."

"That sounds as though you were saying good-by for ever."

They stood clasping each other, strangely moved.

"Ah, no, no, darling," he cried. "We'll never say good-by; never, never. We'll be lovers all our lives long, you and I."

* * * * *

March passed, April and May, and still the enchantment had not waned. The outhouse up at Coulter's Farm was turned into a workshop and furniture-making had begun in earnest. The floor was ringleted with shavings; the air was full of the sound of planes and saws, and the clean delicious smell of new-cut wood. An elderly man and his son, experienced cabinet-makers, had been discovered in Blisloe and persuaded to install themselves in an old railway bungalow which Turges the farmer had long possessed and recently neglected. Friends of whom Valentine had never before heard wrote congratulatory letters to Francis; the less needy would order a bookcase, an electric-light stand, or a gramophone cabinet. Almost at once the Coulter Workshops appeared to revolve of their own accord: it was as though all the parts had been collected into existence and waited eagerly only to be assembled and put in motion. Francis became fussy and practical; he hurried to and fro with sheets of numbered sections, and superintended every detail of the elder Barlow's cutting-out as though the old man were no more than a beginner. The elaboration of ornament which he was obliged for the present to simplify if not to forgo, owing to the shortcomings of staff, material, or tools, he compensated in the lavish use of paint and the curious juxtaposition of colors. "The unexpected is the thing," he assured Valentine as she watched him, "the element of surprise." He seemed to be living on a different, shallower plane of being; a kind of auto-intoxication had begun to stir through the shy deep unconscious life she had first loved in him. As an unconscious creature he was deep and complete; she had known him rare and valued him uniquely. But now even his charm was moving to a more facile level; his conscious life seemed trivialized; he became endlessly enthusiastic over surface cleverness and smart sayings. Valentine grew uneasy, aware that he was less a supreme artist than a clever little craftsman, and fearful for his future. But so long as their happiness held she could not become really distressed; she tossed aside misgiving and let delight have its way. Still, she envied him the interest of the workshop, regretted the days when she had been his only preoccupation, despised herself for that regret, and became yet more absent and ill at ease in her life with Humphrey. By now she had become convinced that Lily was dishonest, but she felt uncertain, she could do nothing; she let life flow by as in a dream.

One afternoon in June she set out for the hill. Johnny Nasher ran out from the brick house as she passed and gamboled about her, staring with fascination in his great eyes. It had become so much a habit of his in the last two months that she had now a nervous fear of passing by that end of the village and frequently chose a footpath which added a mile or so to her walk. Today however she had braved it, thinking that she was becoming cowardly. But something about him distressed her more than usual. It came dimly to her mind as a sensation rather than a visual image, but she forced herself to look attentively at him and trace its cause. One sharp glance was enough. Though the day was hot, he was muffled to the throat in a large blue scarf, the scarf that had once been her own. His great eyes, sly and humid, glittered out of his pale face above its folds. A sense of utter dismay assailed her and she walked on rapidly, reminding herself that she was going, not to Humphrey who preyed on her, but to Francis, who gave life back to her translated into joy. Beyond the meadows, the hills were pure and deep-molded, scarred here and there to show the white chalk, dotted with juniper and haunted with whitebeam, ghostly gray. She dragged herself up the hill and along the edge of the clearing, under the loaded shafts of the beech-trees. The day was tiring; summer was heavy upon her. But it was exquisite to be so near the little house and to know that he was still unaware of her coming; she delayed under the trees, and joy stole into her heart again, like a mild air stirring among the June leaves. How true it was, as she had told him months ago, that he kept evil away from her; all her troubled life at Radnor End fell from her like a cloak on Heron Hill. She smiled to herself softly, in a wave of love and tender gratitude for the man who had given her life its meaning. Above, under the hedge of beech and maple, the little tarred bungalow stood trim and black beneath its shimmering roof of corrugated iron. Softly she walked on between the brambles, up the steps and into the sitting-room.

Francis was darting to the dresser and concealing something beneath the papers that lay there. He turned on her a look which seemed to her more ugly, more shocking, than anything she had divined that life could hold. She stayed shocked and speechless. There was silence in the little house. He continued to look at her, utterly sly and furtive. The silence grew painful beyond bearing. She knew that the whole foundations of her life were giving way.

"Hullo, my dear," he cried at last, in a high, false, jaunty voice. "I didn't hear you come in."

Still she stayed without words, shaken by the appalling illumination. She had seen him as in a vision and knew him naked for what he was. The color had drained from her face, leaving her white and ghastly.

"What are you trying to hide from me?" she whispered.

"I didn't know who it was, coming in," he went on. "I'll show you." With a great air of candor he turned to the pile of papers and drew out a letter. "It's to a woman, a friend of mine, who's ordering a gramophone cabinet. I was sending her one or two designs. But I don't think she'll look at one of mine, she wants a copy, a period reproduction, William and Mary." He chattered away emptily, averting his face. "I'll open it, I'll read it to you if you like."

She sat down by the table, laid her head on her arms and sobbed as though her heart were breaking. At once his arms went round her, his voice became low and caressive.

"My love, my little one, don't cry, don't fret yourself. You're tired; it's a hot day for walking up here. There's nothing in it, really, darling. I'd tell you like a shot if there were. You know it's only you I love."

But still she hardly heard him. He might explain till Doomsday, she did not care. Every word he said might be true; *might* be true. What were all these tedious protestations? Nothing could explain away that action, so instinctive, so terribly self-revealing. She tried to control her grief, but it was too strong, she could not hold it back. The whole thing had come on her like a blow below the belt; she was knocked out, utterly unprepared.

"What am I to do? What am I to say?" he went on. "What are you really crying about? Nothing; you know it's nothing. You know how I love you, how happy we've been. What makes you suddenly turn and doubt me like this? You don't believe I'm in love with this woman, do you, that she's my mistress? Of course you don't. I tell you she's a friend, just a friend, I've known her a long time."

She could not speak; argument with him was not possible; words were not possible; the moment of insight had gone too deep. Hopelessly she gazed at him. The evil spell had not yet worked itself out; his face was still transformed, furtive and evasive; the mouth had shrunk, the eyes had narrowed, beauty was washed from the whole face as with a sponge; it looked mean and harsh, dominated by the beaking nose like a jut of granite.

Outside, the June sun lay heartless over the plain; the distances were fair and blue as a summer sea, behind the spires of foxglove that crimsoned the clearing. Her eyes strayed over them, tranced, unseeing. Below the thicket men were cutting clover in the field that tilted towards them and then meandered down to the foot of the hills; faintly their voices rang on the air as they shouted to one another. Down in the clearing there was the tick of the grasshoppers and the clapping of wood-pigeons' wings. The natural world was still so lovely, so reassuring, it seemed incredible that a pulse of her own life should have stopped.

"And I'd just been out to gather the first wild strawberries for you," he cried in reproach. "I thought we'd have strawberries and cream to celebrate midsummer."

"Is it midsummer?" she asked dully.

He clasped her again, wooing and ardent. "To be sure it's midsummer. And here's my love with a fit of the midsummer madness on her. Don't turn your face away, little image, you know you love me. You've never said no to me yet and you never will."

Her mind went dark with misery and desire, pleaded with him to cure the suffering of which he was the cause. But as they lay quiet after the wave of pleasure was spent she felt alone and utterly separate in the knowledge that something exquisite was ended and something base begun.

* * * * *

Jane's flat was clean, orderly, and finally inexpressive. The girl's delicacy of sense had never become visual, and her rooms might almost have been the rooms of a blind person. Books there were, a fortuitous collection; but no pictures, nothing beautiful; every object was plain and decent and utilitarian. Exposed to the influence of an esthete, Jane would readily have taken her ideas from a taste more defined than her own, but left to herself she approached life so little through the senses that it did not occur to her to demand any distracting standards of beauty in her surroundings. Her flat was in the depressing vale of late Victorian pretentiousness and of peeling stucco near the Portobello Road; it was cheap and extensive, containing a habitable third floor, and a set of leaky attics above, in which visitors from the country were generally accommodated. This evening she expected Valentine and Francis. All day the July heat had lain over London like a stifling blanket; now at the end of the road the sun was leveling, screened by a purple knob of cloud from which it rayed like a sunflower's petals from its dark center. The chimney-pots looked frail and gilt; the street below, glassy, littered with paper, emitted the dead choking smell of asphalt.

Jane sat at the window looking out on to the square with its plane-trees and dried grass, where the children called to one another in harsh cockney voices. Her serenity of spirit was a little clouded: London oppressed her, and she was uneasy about the two who were coming to her tonight. She had never met Francis, and lately had shown no wish to do so, but Valentine had insisted that she must bring him with her. Presently the bell rang. Jane ran down and opened the outer door. Valentine stood there alone.

"Hello. Where is he?"

They walked upstairs hand in hand. "He's coming later: says he's got to see a man. And of course it *may* be a man."

Side by side they sat down on the Chesterfield. "What?" said Jane, puzzled. "What did you say?"

Valentine took off her hat, ran a comb through her hair, sat down, got up to look at herself in the glass, dabbed on some powder, and stood fidgeting against the mantelpiece. All her movements were tense and unrelated.

"You're not very happy," said Jane. "And you don't look as well as you did in the spring. Are things going wrong?"

"Not exactly."

"What, then?"

"Oh, they're all right." She sat down again on the Chesterfield and surveyed her friend. "What lovely eyes you have, Jane. They're so clear today, clear like spring-water. I wish I felt as your eyes look."

Jane waited, very still, as though the expected corollary were a hare that might leap startled away at any movement. Finally the other girl burst out, "It's all changing. I know what he is now and when it began I didn't. How can I expect him to keep faith with me when he's never kept faith yet? 'It's different with you,' he says. 'You're not a fool. I've never loved an intelligent woman before.' But I know that they were all just as 'different' in their turn. And do you know, I feel so *sorry* for those other poor devils who were let down by him; it torments me to think of what he made them suffer, even while I know that it's his past infidelities that have left him free for me to love." She gave a wry little smile. "That's fantastic, isn't it? But you see, I can't believe that my relation with him is more valid than any he has formed in the past; I'm just one of a chain; I've no more hold on him than the rest; I shall be displaced just as they were."

She was silent, staring before her into the days ahead.

"I don't know what you expected when it began," said Jane gravely, "but I know it wasn't this. It doesn't seem to me very much good, Valentine."

"Break off at once, you'd say? Why? Because I'm frightened of ghosts, shadows? No, I can't do that; I don't know how to stop it. I'm just caught up in the machine."

Her voice grew more somber. "If I could believe what he says, then, perhaps . . . But I can't." She turned vividly to Jane. "He's told me a great deal, bit by bit, about my—predecessors. You know he wasn't always a person of leisure; for years he was a little clerk in a warehouse. In those days he was married to a woman who has since divorced him. And his mistress was one of the typists. She used to bring him his letters every morning, and presently there were delivered to the office, two or three times a week, letters from another woman. He couldn't have them sent home because of his wife, and he had got rather tired of the little typist, so he didn't mind her finding out that he was in love with some one else." A dreamy sing-song crept into her voice. She looked round the darkening room as though each corner held a shadowy listener whom she invoked. "Can't you imagine him, the pretty little Don Juan, running from his ledgers round his circle of enamored females! Well, at last the poor little wretch came back to the empty office to see him, one night when he was working late alone. You know, I can *see* that office; the files like rows of black-beetles, the smell of carbon paper, the green-shaded light, and Francis sitting with his black head bent over the books. And then in she bursts. And the little clerk, the little subordinate, how he changes at once, how he becomes the king of his own little castle of amour. And then she cries, so wild, so desperate; everything's lost, he doesn't care any more. And he's shocked at this noisy desperate grief there among the files, and the ledger open to catch her tears. All this indecent human grief, there in an impersonal office. And his mouth goes sullen and mean (I know just how) and he says he doesn't see what all the fuss is about, and if she can't stand his having another woman friend, well, then it's finished. But with all her cries and her reproaches, and the fear that perhaps the night-porter may come in, he gets muddled, and admits what he had never intended to admit, that, yes, he *is* this woman's lover, and yes, he *does* love her more than he loves the little typist, and no, he doesn't really care if he never sees the little typist again. And he doesn't. She goes off and marries the first man she can get hold of. But something is finished and done for in that girl, even though she didn't throw herself in the Thames, for the rest of her life."

She turned wildly to the still little figure beside her. "Do you wonder how I know so much? I know, because I *am* that girl. I'm all the women he's ever let down. Don't ask me; I know it all by heart. Everything he's told me I've lived over until it's a part of my own life."

Jane sat unavailing. Past despairs enveloped the calm of the little room. That she was *in* the predicament, connected up in some way, she could not doubt, but as yet she could not see what the binding threads would be. They sat on in the growing darkness. The air was still hot and heavy. Far off in the streets a barrel-organ began to jingle a fixed, grinning little tune. Valentine resumed, suddenly light and ironical. "Do you know the Fables of Babrius, Jane?"

"No." She drew one of those nervously moving hands between her own, and began to stroke it, as though by the virtue of physical touch she could infuse some degree of calm into the excited girl.

"Well, listen, they're unbelievably true to life, in the way that he draws a moral to suit himself. An old man had two concubines, one young, the other elderly. The young one, wanting to think him a beautiful young lover, pulled out all his gray hairs; and the old one, not wanting him to appear younger than herself, pulled out all his black ones, until the poor man had no hair left between them. And the moral he draws is that women are the evil destroyers of men. Not, as you might reasonably expect, that no man can serve two mistresses. Well, Francis has the method of Babrius all over again. After he had told me the story of the girl at his office, he said, 'And, do you know, I was so moved by it all that I swore I'd never tell any woman the truth again.'"

She laughed harshly, hysterically. "Never to tell the truth again. That's Babrius-Francis, Francis-Babrius: that's the man I love."

"Oh, hush, hush," whispered Jane. "We must straighten it out somehow. Try to see it calmly, Valentine; don't be bitter."

Out of the hot darkness, the bell rang.

"Francis, I suppose," said Jane. "Will you go and let him in?"

The room was switched into light. Jane went into the kitchen and prepared a tray with coffee; the touch of familiar domestic things gave her back a wavering sense of security, and she greeted Francis with her habitual calm and sweetness. He took the tray from her, talked glowingly of small matters, put out all his charm to woo her good opinion, produced chocolates, cigarettes and matches.

"You're like an automatic machine," said Valentine with unconcealed spite as he bent over to light her cigarette.

"Now don't be abusive," he cried. He turned to Jane, charming, glowing. "I heard such a delightful bit of conversation at the corner of the square. Three tiny boys were leaning against the railings with cigarette-ends in their mouths. Oh, such men of the world they were!" He mimicked the cockney accent.

"'Wot d'yer think my wife called me?'

"'Wot?'

"'She called me a dirty bloody worm.'

"'*Oo* did?'

"'My wife.'"

They laughed, but they were wary; they would not eat out of his hand; he could not produce quite the effect of charmed females hanging upon his words that he desired. There was a pause. Then, "Any Wife to any Husband," suggested Valentine derisively.

* * * * *

Along the old Roman road between hill and plain they sauntered, husband and wife, but with no inner correspondence to the legal link between them. Humphrey strode on in the middle of the stream of soft green turf, a tall slack figure without physical coherence, knit together only by the life of the mind: Valentine, hatless, in white, strayed a little behind him, pulling destructively at the blue heads on the shafts of succory and the gold stars of St. John's wort. The flowers of late summer, rockrose, mullein, ragwort and agrimony, were living sparks of yellow flame in the grass, far more alive (thought Valentine) than the discourse of her husband, who stalked on neglectful of all but his own idea of the moment, which appeared to be (justifying heaven knew what convolution of resentment in himself) that art was, in two words, played out. Art had ceased to be relevant; it had degenerated to the uses of a toy or at best a decoration; the future lay with science alone.

"But do they compete?" enquired Valentine mildly, as she listened to the hiss of the wind in a field of oats that lay, deep green, with silvery heads as smooth as satin, on the other side of a low hornbeam hedge. She realized that Humphrey was a tired man; his mind was not only pedestrian but footsore. And all his talk, however apparently objective, slanted censure at somebody or other; Francis, Sikey, herself, even poor friendly Blair.

"He's a bit of a hypocrite, old Blair. If he were an honest man he'd resign his living. All he cares for is archeology and gardening: he's hopelessly out of touch with his parish. After all, a man of God should be a man of God."

Poor Humphrey, she thought, waiting for the attack on art to develop a bias towards arty-craftiness in general and furniture-making in particular; he lived in a lonely and loveless universe, and found it difficult as well as gratifying to avenge his position. Presently, as she expected, it swerved. "And as for crafts masquerading as art, in these days of the perfect manufactured product and a proper system of distribution, it's simply a medieval affectation."

Her wandering mind caught a word here and there. "The whole Renaissance wasn't so far removed from what you sneer at as arty-crafty," she cried, and was abruptly silenced as she remembered that she did not in the least wish to defend Merryweather's rococo designs. They walked on for some time without a word. At last Humphrey spoke again.

"The firm has asked me to go out to Greece this autumn. They're going to start a series of specially conducted motor tours in the early spring, and they want me to take the whole thing in hand. Our people in Athens are frightfully slack, and I'm going to take over the whole arrangements for several months at least. Are you prepared to come with me?"

She went very still, standing her ground, but alarmed. "No, I'm not."

There in the green lane he began to rage at her. "My God, what you think—what you expect—do you think my patience is eternal? I've stood it, I've put up with it; heaven knows what everybody thinks; I suppose the village is seething with gossip and a pretty sort of fool they think me."

"Then let me go," she said, very low.

"I won't; I utterly refuse. You'll give him up and come out to Greece with me." He towered above her, with contorted face, white and violent. "Good God, you've had your way, done as you liked, fooled everybody to the top of their bent—well, it's gone far enough, do you hear? It's got to stop. I've let it go on all this time; I've been a fool. Well, it's got to stop now. I tell you I'll stand no more. Do you know what that means if you persist?"

She looked at him blankly, bewildered by his empty violence; it was so lost, so bleating, so completely without a center.

"It means divorce," he shouted. The word rang down between the summer hedges; a breath of July air came to them weighted with the scent of honeysuckle; its sallow flowers and red wormy sprays were twisted among the thorn. Valentine pulled a sprig and fastened it in her frock, suddenly so unaware of him that, watching her, he felt a new furious uprush of brutal feeling; his hands stung with desire to crush that soft throat; almost his tongue lolled out like an animal's as he savored what it would be like to have her in a panic of terror, vulnerable at last. His heart began to throb with fear of his own thoughts; fear of himself mastered him, and he choked back a sob, looking at the girl with a sudden wild appeal in his eyes that she should save him from himself. She went tender at once.

"Oh, Hump, it's terrible. I don't know what to do. I ought to have left you long ago. It's so muddled now, I can see no way out. You see, I didn't want to let you down completely, I wanted to help you where I could, but now it seems I've done the worst possible thing by staying. Oh, don't look like that, my lamb, I can't bear it." In torn, hopeless pity she stroked his hands. "Go away for a time alone, Hump, and then perhaps we shall all see it in proportion; it will come clearer what we have to do."

They faced each other in the road between the quiet fields of green barley and yellowing wheat, but could read no answer in each other's eyes.

"Promise me," he said at last, husky and awkward, "that you won't forget everything if I go alone. Promise me you'll try to keep a sort of faith with me."

What were promises, she wondered even as she gave her word? Made to be broken. But it was life and not one's self, she fancied, that did the breaking.

* * * * *

Sikey, unchanged (it seemed) after her year's absence, lay idly in a chair beside the garden door. The silence was filled with the long applause of the rain, sounding on the roof of the porch outside. Mist was eddying and curling like a snake about the hills; the sky seemed near as the ceiling. She wondered if that was why houses in England were so toadlike; the sky so near, no need to aspire. She had returned home enthusiastic over American architecture and

American breakfasts, and she thought grimly how fortunate it was for the peace of the household that Humphrey should have gone away with his sister to spend two or three weeks among the Italian lakes, as a holiday before he went on to Greece. What furious arguments they would have had. She remembered an irritable challenge he had thrown out before she had left England. "America's not a nation; it's a state of mind." And he had proceeded to prove whatever point it was that he was trying to prove, by reference to the crime statistics of Chicago. Sikey smiled impishly as she thought of the dislike subsisting between Humphrey and herself. She considered him pompous, pontifical, and altogether unpleasant in his attitude to women, and she was rather pleased on the whole that he gave her back dislike for dislike, that he was not at his ease with a woman who had been deeply dyed in sexual experience, that she could prick the bubble of his male conceit with her own irony. That of course was one face of the penny. But turned over, it showed the disquieting aspect that hated Humphrey was the husband of beloved Valentine; that was a fact she did not care to contemplate, although, as she reminded herself, Valentine did not lag very far behind herself in antagonism towards him.

The door opened; Valentine came in and perched on the arm of her chair. Sikey considered her lovingly, but the light in her brown eyes was witty and not sentimental.

"You've changed," she observed at last.

The other girl looked slightly defensive. "Yes, I've changed."

"A year ago you had an air of settled gloom," continued Sikey. "But now you don't seem gloomy and you look very far from settled. Have things altered between you and

Humphrey? Jane never tells me anything, you know. I've often wondered how things were going."

"Yes, I suppose they've altered a little." Valentine moved away from the penetrating eyes. "But let's talk about you. I don't much want to talk about me."

"This," said Sikey ironically, "is new."

Neither spoke for a while. Both felt their friendship fundamentally unchanged, but a cloud hung on it for the moment. Valentine was still disinclined for confidences concerning Francis, and the more so now that her mind was not at rest about him. Sooner or later she supposed she would tell, but not yet; she could not expose all her doubts and uncertainties and (why stop short of the word?) actual suffering to that bright mocking gaze.

"It's just a year since I was here last," remarked Sikey presently. "Things go on and on and never change very vitally, do they? We're a jog-trot trio. Jane stays in her office, and you go on living at Radnor End, and even if I go to America and have a new man or so, it's all much of a muchness really; round and round the same circle, like a squirrel in its cage."

She got up and stood at the open door, looking out at the melancholy evening. "And round and round again.

Misleading fond mortality
That harries us about, and sets us down
Just where we first begun."

Valentine put an arm through her friend's. "Still faithful to your one poet? Look at the creased leaves on the cherry-tree; don't they look as though they had once been folded and packed up, and never shaken out since?"

"Which reminds me," said Sikey, "that I must pack up too. I've got to catch the six o'clock you know."

Left alone, Valentine pulled a letter from the pocket of her jumper. It stirred her mind like an echo, of which she had once caught the original sound. It had a connection she had so far failed to establish, with some preceding idea which once traced would, she felt, throw an illumination on what was now dark within it. Again she read the last two lines; it was merely the over-fervent close of an ordinary love-letter.

> *Love me, love me, for I love you in a way that bears no reckoning.*
>
> *Yours and so* faithfully *yours,*
> *Francis.*

She folded it up and put it away as Sikey came downstairs with her suitcase.

"I'll come with you to the station."

"No, don't do that. You'll get wet."

They stood for a moment with a flash of the old excited affection leaping out between them. All the week-end a curtain had divided them; now it had fallen away and they were free to communicate. They paused, alight with love, longing to make amends.

"Darling, I wanted to tell you," began Valentine, flushing. She caught herself up as a step sounded on the path outside and Francis Merryweather stood at the door. She barely looked at him; everything became confused and falsified, she could not transfer that warm lit feeling, like an opening flower, to the man who had broken its spell with the girl.

"Why, isn't that providential," she cried in a bright affected voice. "Here's some one who'll carry your bag to the station, Sikey."

She introduced them, talked rapidly, frivolously, hardly regarding him. "Miss Sykes is an economist. But she has very extravagant ideas. She thinks banks can lend more money than they possess. I can't believe she has thought it out properly."

Francis looked subtly, secretively, at the dark girl. "Let me think a minute. But how marvelous, you're perfectly right, they can!"

"Meanwhile I shall miss my train," said Sikey. But she was not flurried, she was amused. How lovely and confident and complete she looked in her trim town clothes, thought Valentine. There was not an ounce of superfluous flesh on her body nor of superfluous sentiment in her mind. Francis seized the bag.

"Come along then, we must run for it."

They ran. The garden gate slammed. Valentine threw herself in the chair, suddenly forlorn. For a long while she lay there, revolving trivialities in the vacuum of her mind. Outside the rain threshed on; darkness swallowed up the hills and encroached on the garden. She got up at last, stiff all over, and dismayed to realize that Francis had not returned, apparently did not intend to return. Why? Had she been so cold to him? After his walk down the hills in the rain, could he possibly, out of pique or anger, walk back again without another word to her? Evidently he could. "Yours and so *faithfully* yours," she repeated in bitterness. And at once, blindingly, the connection was lit in her mind. *"Yours in the ranks of death." "My most dear Gloucester!"* Yes, there it was, the thing was illuminated now; he was Edmund, the bombastic philanderer; incarnate falsity. The link established, her mind subsided once more into vacuity. She believed him worthless, and still she could not forgo her earlier lovelier image of him: she doubted and yet hoped.

* * * * *

The equinoctial gales had fallen to a bright October peace. Plain and sky softened to the blue of wild hyacinths, the beechwoods gleamed orange in the autumn-scented air. An aspect of tranced loveliness haunted the hills, and the trees were now unchanging of leaf, as though transfixed for ever in their last grandeur, a step away from ruin. But Mrs. Namble, watching from her cottage window, waited sullenly for that outer life to fall into decay; the bright tints and the soft air offended her spirit. She looked restlessly out at the road. Valentine was coming to see her; she had had a postcard to say so; and she did not want to see Valentine.

"Why can't she let me alone?" she thought angrily. She picked up her knitting; a tiny woolly garment that she had laid down between the geraniums in the window. But her mouth hardened as the needles moved in her hands. Hearing a step outside, she pushed it out of sight and stood up, a stout woman angry and at bay.

Valentine came in and sat down, pushing her hair back with a nervous movement.

"Well, Namkin, how are things?"

"None too grand," said Mrs. Namble.

"They aren't with me either," said Valentine. "I simply don't know what to do. Do you know what Sikey said to me the other day? She said, 'Of decent men and swine I prefer swine. They both behave exactly alike, only with the swine you're prepared for it.' Do you think that's true?"

"Maybe." Mrs. Namble looked at her visitor with some hostility. "We all behave as we must. And you're a white hen that never laid astray, ain't you?"

The girl changed color, guilty and tremulous, and looked about her. Something was wrong. Piles of unmended linen lay on the chairs, there was dust on the clock, and the grate had not known the touch of a blacklead brush for several days.

"Why don't you look after your house a bit better?" went on Mrs. Namble's voice with that new hard note. "That Lily's turning into a regular good-for-nothing. Gads about the village a' nights with fellows young enough to be her sons, and where she gets her silk stockings from I'd like to know; they don't come out of Richards at Radnor End, I reckon."

The two women were silent, withdrawn behind unaccustomed barriers. Valentine thought unhappily how right were the social rules of thumb which would have made any personal contact between herself and Mrs. Namble a matter of impossibility. She had gone her own way, insisted on the personal element at any cost, and now found herself facing the difficulties which the common sense of society had always foreseen and avoided. But then a wave of shame accused her of easy capitulation.

"What is it, Namkin?" she asked softly, with averted eyes. "Couldn't you tell me?"

"No, Miss Valentine, that I couldn't." Again there was silence. Still Valentine did not look up. Presently in an altered tone, "Well, you might as well know," conceded the woman. "The whole village'll be clacking in another month or so. My Susie—the one in service at Blisloe—she's in the family way. The young fellow's gone off to Australia and left her and she's got to come home to me. When she left home I said to her, I said, 'Now if you gets into any trouble, just you take it where you got it from, for it's no use bringing it here.' But there, when it falls out like this, what are you to do? It's just about worried my guts out since I heard. She's coming back here Tuesday."

So, the conquest of a span of leisured, dignified, contented life was as precarious as this. Susie's downfall was the downfall also of her mother's pride, her independence and love of solitude. Life, like nature, was always waiting to sow man's patch of cultivated ground with thorn and thistle, to undo achievement and to menace hope. Humbled, Valentine put her arms round the older woman.

"Namkin dear, I am so sorry. But it won't be so bad as you expect now; people forget; and perhaps it will be a lovely grandchild. Don't think simply of today; think of five and ten years on. You won't be able to imagine that you ever felt like this about Susie's child."

They parted affectionately, and Valentine hastened off up the hill road, aware that they had saved the situation by the skin of their teeth and would feel intolerable prigs if they stayed together a moment longer. Her heart lightened as she realized the tide of thought that had borne Mrs. Namble towards hostility. There's that Miss Valentine has her fun and answers to nobody and why should my Susie have to go through all this trouble? Ah, yes, life is so complicated for each of us, so simple for other people. So it was with gayety and a new courage that she arrived at the bungalow in the clearing. Francis was not there and she knew he did not care for her to come often to the workshop up at Coulter's Farm, so she laid tea and waited, looking with tenderer eyes upon the woodland. Fluffy spikes of brown-pink rosebay and dark green thistles with heads like shaving-brushes stood among the buff grass; the brambles were tattered as when she had first come to stay on Heron Hill. They had been lovers a year. Exquisite recollection, a little falsified by passing through the subtle sieve of memory, flowed into her heart, and when at last she heard his step in the doorway she ran to greet him with a rush of the old fervor. They had met hardly at all in the last month, for Francis had been spending a good deal of time in London, buying wood and looking up friends who might be helpful in one way or another, but now as he came in with the lighted look she had known so well in their first months together, it seemed that the summer with its suspicions and constraints was dissipated like a bad dream. It was full autumn now, the time of the turning leaf, their very own season. Full of sudden joy, she flew to his arms.

"And quite time too," he murmured, nibbling her ear. "All this week I've been expecting you. Yesterday I nearly came to fetch you."

"You do think of me sometimes when I'm not there, then?"

"Do I ever think of anything else?"

Gayly they sat down to tea. There was watercress in a brown bowl, and a new pad of butter, as yellow as a primrose, lying among tinted leaves. Life ran fresh as a stream after the spring rains. She stole a look at him as he sat beside her, aglow with animal beauty; the clear brown eyes answered her gaze, and when his hand touched hers, she felt there came a harmony like music questioning and replying. But she had to break it; there were things to say.

"Francis, I've something to tell you. Not a very nice thing. I got a letter from Humphrey today; an inimical sort of letter. He says he sees no point in keeping on the house at Radnor End while I'm alone there; I'm to shut it up and go to London and let him know as soon as this is done, or he refuses to send me any more money. Of course he's trying to break up this thing between us, that's obvious. What am I to do?"

He looked a little shifty. "You must do what you want to do."

"But that depends on what *you* want."

"I?"

"Yes, of course. Don't begin to pretend you don't know that I simply live for what's between us."

Still he was shifty. "And what's that?"

Something went cold within her. Was he teasing, or willfully cruel? She could not bear to force the issue by asking a question more, she just sat silent and baffled. The table was disordered now; cigarette-ash spilt on the plates; a brown-rimmed hole on the check cloth where a spark had fallen. He had turned away and was searching through some papers. The rustling noise rasped her nerves like a file. She got up and went to the door.

"Where are you going?" he cried. "Come here, look at this. I designed a bed for you last night; some day when there's time and money we'll make it."

She took the drawing, while he continued to explain. "You see, there are sort of wings at the head. One side will take a dish of apples and a lamp, and the other side will take books. It's painted a silver gray, all except that bit of bead and reel; that's blue. You could lie and read poetry all day long in a bed like that."

The thing was really beautiful; it astonished her with its pure and simple lines, and the thought of him, sitting and working into the night in the lonely house, with her in his mind, moved her intensely.

"Darling, it's lovely," she said softly. "It's the loveliest thing you've ever done; it's completely beautiful."

He watched her, dark and ardent. "And I did it for you. Oh, Valentine, how can you go on doubting me? Look here, if our affair—" he corrected himself, "if our love has let you in for this difficulty with Humphrey there's only one thing to be done. You must come and live here with me. You can't go to London; we'd never see each other."

She was distrustful, abashed. Here was the economic problem indeed at its heavy-footed worst. Was it going to stamp out entirely the frail lovely link between them? Yet if she came to live with him, what could their future be? She considered her own circumstance and character: she was dreamy, lazy, penniless, a drifter and waster, with no overpowering beauty or charm beyond that violent sensual personality he had evoked in her and which she looked on less as herself than as a sort of curious demoniac possession; she was truthful, which pleased him little, and critical, which pleased him not at all. It would take a very short time, here in this tiny unescapable house, for him to have as few illusions about her as she had herself.

"You'd hate me in a week," she murmured at last.

"Never, never, never," he cried. "If that's all you're afraid of, then there's no more to say. Shut up the house and come to me. And as for Humphrey, may the devil fly away with Humphrey." Drawing her into his arms, he breathed fantasy against her ear. "It'll be so marvelous; I'll do such lovely things for you up in that workshop. Oh, Valentine, think of the days and the nights we have before us."

In the cloudy morning they walked together up the lane between the cornfield and the wood. The stubble lay wan beyond the mesh of twigs; the floor of the wood was rusted over with fallen leaves. A robin, fluting his autumn note, scuttered about at the edge of a copse, the only live thing in that silent world, sloping down towards the year's death. Both of them were a little oppressed; a quiet that was almost an anxiety held their minds in leash. At the end of the lane, on the high hill road, they stopped.

"I've got to go down to the post with these letters," said Francis. "Would you mind just looking in and telling old Barlow that the knobs are to be yew, not ebony, as I told him. He'll probably be starting on them at once."

"But I could take the letters down to Radnor End," suggested the girl. "They'd catch the same post."

"Oh, no," he cried, skipping away with an undignified little movement, like a goat. "Oh, no, I wouldn't trust you. You'd put them in your pocket and forget." He tittered and moved off. "Good-by, good-by. Now, you're coming here next week, I'll see you next week. And yew, not ebony. Don't forget that."

Off he went, waving, and she followed the northward road. Coulter's Farm was trim and snug with its great barns, black as slabs of licorice, and the ricks like pale sponge-cakes. Straws disheveled the roads and spiked the hedges. She made her way round to the workshop at the back. Young Barlow was cross-cutting a board; old Barlow was shouting to him from the other end of the workshop.

" 'Tain't a knob-turning, I tell 'ee; that's got to be fret-cut to look like twist." He came forward with an inexplicable expression as he caught sight of Valentine.

"Yes, miss. Good morning, miss. Was it a message?"

The whole workshop had gone inquisitive and hostile. Young Barlow's board split across with a report that rang to the rafters. Valentine stood awkwardly in the doorway.

"Mr. Merryweather said, if you hadn't started those knobs in ebony they were to be in yew."

Old Barlow fingered his apron. The web of lines deepened in his old face. "He'll be comin' along presently, will he, miss? He must 'a' forgotten. They're done, finished. We did 'em this week while he was up in London."

"Oh, I see." A gray breath of premonition chilled her through. "When was that, now?"

"Let me see. When was it Mr. Merryweather was gone, Tom? Tuesday and Wednesday, warn't it? Yes, miss, he come back yesterday morning. Funny him forgetting about the knobs. Well, we sall have to see what he says."

She strolled back across the hills with all the old grief revived. Why had he thought it necessary to mislead her about having been in London during the week? Was lying second nature to him, and hence quite meaningless, or was he really trying to conceal something? To go and live with him when she trusted him so little was like going to live on the slopes of Etna when an eruption was threatened at any moment; it was nothing less than the pursuit of catastrophe. Her whole spirit threshed to and fro in a wind of unrest.

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It had been a perverse sort of pleasure to leave everything so perfectly in order. An inventory of china and glass was pinned up on the door of the cupboard; rugs and bedding were rolled up and stacked away; the furniture was shrouded in dust-sheets. They had turned the whole house into a tomb. Now Valentine stood in the doorway, looking for the last time out on to the drenched lawn on which the last leaves of the year were eddying down. The garden and the orchard beyond were shrunken and insignificant now that they were despoiled of their summer mystery of foliage. Across the road outside, the first frost was spattered in patches, and up on the hill the woods gloomed purple. Melancholy weighted the air. She looked across her shoulder into the hall; tatters of old newspaper and twists of string lay like a dew of departure on the stone floor. The beginning of life in the cottage was nearer to her than it had ever been in the three past years; past hopes linked on to the present knowledge of their unfulfillment and completed that cycle of existence. It was finished; she knew that she was leaving Radnor End for good, and going out to a future so fantastically insecure that she caught her breath to contemplate it, like a swimmer about to jump into an icy river. And she had lost sight of the reasons for that bitter immersion as well as the other shore which was not yet visible ahead.

Lily came in with a broom and began to sweep over the floor. The fussy mouselike noise of the brush whisked from corner to corner. They did not speak. Once there had been affection and confidence between them, but the past months had whittled it away. Now Lily was pert and ambitious, had resolved to look for work in the nearest town or in London, and Valentine had withdrawn into a cold aloofness. She moved out into the garden. Coppery leaves flecked the lawn; shaggy clumps of chysanthemum and Michaelmas daisy columned the sodden borders. Humphrey, three autumns back, had flapped up and down these walks, eager and ungainly. "Here we'll have another brick path, and we'll put in two or three hundred bulbs under the apple-trees." Other plans they had made concerning extensions, concerning babies. The present held the dim past as the new moon holds in its arms the ghost of the old. Now Humphrey was consuming his days in dusty Athens in a fret of sentimentality and self-pity. She wondered how he would take the news that she had gone to live with Francis. They had got into a position in which it was no longer possible to behave with dignity, decency, or mutual consideration, and now he was whipping on his grievances by falsification of the past: to read his last two letters, any one would suppose their married life to have been a flawless idyl, treacherously shattered by that interloper, that snake in the grass, Francis Merryweather. Well, snake in the grass he might yet prove himself to be, but Humphrey's revised version of their acrimonious years of housekeeping she was not prepared to accept.

"There's the carrier coming up the road, m'm," volunteered Lily from the porch.

Fascinated, she watched her luggage as the van's dark cave engulfed it; in the road the engine panted with rough breath. To load a box on a carrier's van and to turn a key: so simply a tract of vital life was left behind.

For the last time she had walked the familiar road across the hills. They might have been the levelest of flat-lands, for the plain was curtained off with mist. Like the air, the earth was soft and soggy; soon drops would begin to patter from the trees. The bungalow was empty; towels and a dirty collar hung on a clothes-line above the fireless stove. The table was still covered with the remains of a meal. Everything looked dirty, slovenly, and dispirited. For a moment she sat down in the wicker chair, shivering in her clammy mackintosh. It was no use dissolving into a mood of despair even over this coldest of welcomes; no doubt something unexpected had kept him up at the workshop. She got up again, resolved to go and find him there.

In the dimming light a car showed up against the barns.

Francis stood in the doorway of the workshop, talking to two women whose furred and bearlike silhouettes attenuated downwards into sheeny stockings and high-heeled shoes. Darts of laughter flew out from the lighted room, and then his voice, rustic but consciously charming.

"And so I stayed still as a rock, waiting to see what it was. Presently he came hustling through the bushes, a young weasel with a coat as glossy as a silk hat, pushing an egg along with his snout, like a schoolboy with a football. He must ha' trundled it up through the wood. I suppose I moved, for all in a twinkling he scutters off into the undergrowth, leaving his egg at my feet. I picked it up: a partridge's egg it was. And then he went off, swearing like the devil at all that sweat and nothing to show for it."

"Oh, delicious, delicious, Francis," trilled the voice of one of the bears. "You ought to write your experiences living alone in a wood. My dear, you'll be another Hudson."

Valentine hung back, unable to break into a picture whose composition was already complete. Francis was so happy, cradled in the downy element of feminine adulation. She watched; the women caressed him with their attentive presences; he spoke again, leaning carelessly against the lintel of the door.

"Y'know, it's bally marvelous what rum things you can see, even sitting at the window of a shanty in a wood when it's pouring with rain. It was only the other day, I was staring out at the empty wood—one of those gray forlorn days when you feel you must go and hang yourself from the nearest tree, except that it doesn't seem worth the bother of knotting a rope and pleasing your pernickety fancy by choosing a bough—and then, just outside on one of the buckthorn bushes, I spied a long-tailed tit rocking about on the twigs. I got up to see what he was doing. And there he was, the little beggar, holding on to the prong of the tree with one claw, and the other claw round a berry he was biting into, just as if he'd been a kid chewing an apple."

Once more a ripple of applause ran through the two furred women. Then, "Francis, darling, we must go," cried one of them. "Will you be in town again next week? Then of course you must come to a meal. I want you to meet some people—it's ridiculous that you should hide your enchanting self away like this. We'll find you a wife or a mistress to cheer your solitude."

They walked out into the dark, Francis in the middle, and moved towards the car. Valentine slipped behind a stack until the car had throbbed away, throwing a searchlight of yellow radiance before it into the night. Presently she heard his tread on the bare boards of the workshop and after a short interval followed him in. The men had already gone home: he was sitting alone at a table, numbering the sections of a drawing under the white flare of a petrol lamp. His upraised glance as he heard her footstep was sullen. "No, I'm no longer worth his while to charm," she thought bitterly.

"Well," said he, "how's yourself? Bless me, I clean forgot it was today you were coming along. Brought your traps with you?"

"They're coming from Blisloe by carrier," she said, standing stiff and confused in the doorway.

He laid his work aside, put out the lamp, and they walked in silence back to the bungalow. Silently he laid a fire while she cleared away the dirty plates. Both were aware that their relationship was undergoing a reverse transformation from the bright-winged butterfly life of lovers to the drab sorry chrysalis of conjugality. After supper he moved from the table, lit his pipe, opened a book and began to read. Through drooping lashes she glanced at him. He was her house-mate now; they would eat from the same dish and share the same bed for—who knew how long? But they had no common ground; after the kisses came silence, for there was nothing to say. It was going to be a bitter thing to share a man's life without sharing his thoughts. Any one in the world could now possess more of him than she could; those women today whom he had not mentioned, a girl picked up in a London tea-shop, a chance companion on a railway journey. Other women would have the privilege that had once been hers; the gift of his presence because he desired to be with them. True, his past meetings with her had all sprung out of desire, but who could suppose desire dictated that they should now share the dull days and habituated nights? No, no, no; their love had had its roots in excitement, sensationalism, romance; and transplanted to a soil of sober housekeeping commonplace it would not and could not live.

* * * * *

Early December brought the first fall of snow, after a week of bitter days and black freezing nights. The ground was hard as cast iron, with unresilient ridges, and ice which it was tempting to tread to splinters in the puddles. Frost hushed the tattered woods and froze even their conversation.

"Game of darts?" Francis would enquire tersely after breakfast. He had fixed a round section of a tree-trunk to the wall in place of a board, and marked off its segments and circles in blue chalk. Round after round they played, with barely a word except for the throb of the feathered darts into the board and the shouting of their scores. And

"Game of dominoes?" he would suggest as they sat silent by the fire at nights after supper; so dominoes they would play, and the cribbage pegs they used for scoring climbed to the top of the hairpin bend and down the other side, and the black and white pieces ranged like defensive walls between them on a round green tray, and cigarette-smoke fumed the air, and never a word passed that could make their separate lives seem one.

"This is like a bad dream," thought Valentine. "Can it be a bad dream to me and not to him? It's as though we were tied together as a pair of corpses. What has happened to our love and why do we live together like this?" But still, passionate and unrelated to the day, their lovers' nights went on.

"I love you—love you—love you. There's nothing like you on earth—I'll never, never let you go," he would murmur hotly in the winter darkness, while the owls hooted outside and the leafless beeches, pewter-stemmed in the moon, seemed to shiver with the cold. "Oh, God, how can we ever stop being lovers?" sighed she in his arms. But with the morning they were alien, disparate; their eyes were ashamed, as though through fear to find in each other's a memory and an insistence on the hours of darkness.

But when they woke on that December morning and Francis went to the window, raking a hand through his tumbled black hair, he gave a cry of pleasure. A revestation of the earth had come about during the night. Over the clearing and the distant fields lay a coat of snow, pure and close-woven, and over the snow lay the sun so long unseen, lighting up the white crystals and painting a blue shadow beneath every bush.

"Oh, Val, the snow, the snow! Come and look," he cried like a child. She slid from bed and came over to the window. An arm slipped round her shoulders as they gazed together on the changed contours of their world. The fields were smooth and wrinkleless, as though a roll of velvet had been stretched upon them; buds of snow curled in the interstices between every twig and branch; the blackened woods seemed bursting into bloom.

They leant out of the window. Snow had almost submerged the chopping-block below the house; it lay in a ridge on the billhook that had been slammed into the wood, lay in pads on the dying bramble-leaves. The claws of birds had made Gothic traceries upon its surface. Cheek to cheek, they looked with delighted eyes; the shared moment dissolved in kisses, and kisses stirred the desires that were never very far nor very deep asleep.

"Come back to bed, come back to bed," said he, wooing her with ardent hands. "Curse the workshop—it doesn't exist today. Nothing exists but ourselves; the world's been just created for you and I."

She ruffled his hair, ready to be taken, and cross with her mind which corrected his grammar at a time when love was about to be reborn in the snows. Long into the winter morning they lay together, with a rapture the more poignant because it was distrusted by hope and denied by common sense. "We're all right so long as there's this between us," he declared as he teased her breasts with his lips. "We shall always be all right, darling—what's to stop us being?"

But at last they were walking up to the farm in the midday brightness, between the snow-clotted hedges. In the lane their feet made dark tracks on its sparkling surface. Wheels and hooves had already begun to pound it to a gravy-like slush on the high road, but on the fields it lay still a close pure carpet. Almost knee-deep, the cattle stood stiffly in it like Noah's Ark animals: evidently they had stood moveless for a long while, their four legs planted deep like trees in the ground, for no tracks were visible about them. A white roof hatted the farm and outbuildings; a collar of snow was on every window-sill. About the garden scratched half a dozen white Wyandottes, turned to a dirty cream by contrast; their little red combs were startling as sealing-wax on a vast sheet of paper.

"Post for you," said Francis, glancing through the letters, when they had arrived at the workshop. She took them from him and put them in her pocket. The sad thing about living with one's lover was the daily uninterestingness of the post; there was nothing to delight expectation or to kindle hope. She watched him as he turned to old Barlow, his own letters still in his hand, and felt dismissed. "That cross-banded bit . . . no, that table's got to be in the white . . . the projecting molding's too heavy."

Young Barlow opened the top of the anthracite stove and poured in more fuel from the black tubelike scuttle, then went back to his planing. Presently Francis came across to her again.

"Look here, would you mind taking these drawings and washing them in? You can do it down in the cottage; there's not room to do another thing at my office table. I'll show you the colors for the different woods."

"Do you want me to answer any of the letters?"

He pushed them aside at once and laid a paperweight on the top of them. "Haven't looked through 'em myself yet, my dear." Off he went again to direct old Barlow. His air, his look, his very walk had altered in the last few months, she thought, remembering the shy lovely animal he had been a year ago. In passing from animal unconsciousness to the early stages of awareness his secret quality had become merely secretive, his reserve sly. Transmuted to the human level, his shyness and mystery thinned out to the obvious, the strutting and the self-assured. Now that the key of his life was changed, pitched higher, it was no longer pure in timbre, but shrill and pert. Animal grace indeed he had, but no human dignity.

"Now be off with you," he cried from the other end of the workshop. "Get me those drawings done, there's a good kid."

The sun had gone in as she walked back again through the snow; the twigs showed black against a gray sky; the woods were purple, misted over; she felt lonely, cold and melancholy. A vacuum had been created about the two of them in which some intangible issue was to be fought out. Never a word for weeks from Jane and Sikey; never a word from anybody. She was reminded of the letters in her pocket, and pulled them out. Two bills forwarded from Radnor End; a communication from the General Post Office recommending an extension to the telephone, and (after a silence of two months) a letter from Humphrey.

She stopped in the white lane, tearing open the flimsy foreign envelope. A single sheet fluttered between her fingers.

Dear Valentine,—I may as well tell you at once that on my return to England in February I intend to sue for a divorce. H.

Divorce. She walked on, brooding. Divorce. In Humphrey's formal hand it looked a sly and sinister word, suggesting less an honorable legal procedure than a threat of torture or revenge. Divorce. Well, what more natural? If they could have gone before a Justice of the Peace and signed a declaration that they were no longer willing to live under one roof, it would have been a simple and honest business. But that their intricate predicament should be twisted and telescoped into the conventional drama of deceived husband, erring wife and guilty partner was a falsification against which she rebelled. She tossed the letter on the table and began to tidy up the cottage. The tumbled bed recalled to her the morning's ardor and she set herself to imagine how Francis would react. By the bedside she paused, stripping off the coverings. Beloved Francis; dark hair and lighted glance; Francis the cherished and the distrusted; could any woman of heart put such a weapon to his charming head? She rather thought that a woman of heart could. So the letter lay on the table to catch his eye when he came in. Valentine continued to wash up in the kitchen at the back, her ears alert for any sound. None came. As though there could be a sound. The sound of Francis struggling with his better self, she thought, satiric and pitying. Presently she piled the crockery on a tray and carried it into the living-room.

Francis had taken off his gum-boots; he was smoking a pipe beside the fire, shoulders a little hunched, face fallen to sullenness. Hook after hook of the dresser she adorned with cup or jug, rather noisily so that the silence should not seem to force him into speech. The cottage walls stood stiflingly round them. The room was too small to house any but the lesser and meaner emotions.

"Game of darts?" said Francis at last.

"All right."

She threw first. Twice the darts flew past her ear and buried themselves in the wall beside their improvised target; the third settled in the outer ring.

"Three," she said, stepping back. He wrote it down and took his turn.

"A seven and a nine and three times five—that's thirty-one."

Again she threw and this time every dart went wide.

"Lost your aim tonight, old man," he cried. He took his throw, scoring a bull and two double tens.

The game was soon up; she was badly defeated.

"Well, to celebrate my victory I think I'll go and have a drink at the pub," he observed, drawing on his boots again. "Shan't be late."

"What about supper?" said she with averted head.

"Oh, I'll get a bit of bread and cheese up there," he answered, and was gone into the snow-floored night.

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Behind the drawn blind was the quietest room in the world. The brush that a dead hand had used only a day ago lay on the dressing-table, and caught in the comb was a weft of hair from the moveless head.

"She looks a picture, doesn't she?" said Mrs. Namble. Slow tears trickled from the reddened eyes, and she did not brush them away but stood simply, looking down upon the face of her daughter. A ghostly color still hovered in the ample country cheeks, but the mouth was set with a hint of weariness, as though an "I'm tired, leave me" had just left her lips. A formless bundle lay in the crook of her arm.

"Poor Susie," murmured Valentine. "She must be glad it's over. Don't you think perhaps too she's glad to have been let off a difficult job?"

"She does look peaceful," said the elder woman in a kind of assent. "They have the best of it, I fancy, those who go."

They stood together in warm-breathing silence by the bed, life befooled by death. The future that a few months earlier the mother had foreseen and dreaded, that had become dearer as it approached, was dearest of all now that it could never coarsen from image into fact. As Valentine saw it, Mrs. Namble was tricked every way. A possibility had been first undesired, then accepted, then welcomed; it had hovered a moment and gone, taking with it the color from a life that had been content before its coming. Lucky Susie who might have lived disparaged had died regretted; and who could not envy her the dignity of dying? A supreme experience had passed over that quiet figure, and made even love seem shoddy in the presence of death. The two women stood rebuked. No noisy outburst of grief came from Mrs. Namble; she seemed awestruck, as though her daughter, plain Susie Namble, had suddenly been translated to a sphere of power beyond her knowledge and was now far ahead of her in wisdom. And the dead girl seemed a reproach to the petty ragings of jealousy and self-pity that had lately tormented Valentine. These were not, as she had been assuming, life itself, but merely her own weakness in the face of life.

"You will so soon be as I am," said the dead lips. "Are you content to be as I am, feeling as you feel now?"

She walked home reflective in the windy afternoon. It was not long past the New Year; the elms were a web of black lace on a pallid sky; only the buds of the elder, like shavings of beetroot laid along the gray twigs, promised the end of winter. Farms and scattered cottages were rooted in mud. A rook blew out of an ash-tree and sailed down the wind.

"It's no good," she thought, striking with her stick at the dried grass by the footpath. "I must go away. That's what Francis means me to do. He has withdrawn himself deliberately; he wants me to feel unsupported, to know that there's nothing to trust to in him. Very well, what else can I do? I can't oblige him to behave with loyalty where he prefers to behave irresponsibly. He's a vulgar little sensationalist and he's made me over again in his own image. To think that our relation once seemed the most beautiful thing that life could give. Oh, these hills, how tired I am of muddy footpaths and misted woods."

She looked down across the drab lowlands. It was very still; there was no movement, no sound, anywhere: only the ticking of the wind among the shriveled stalks of ragwort on the hill. She supposed Jane would take her back at the flat, nor would Jane be very much surprised if she were to arrive one night on the doorstep, for her last letter had confessed very plainly her own profound unhappiness.

As she approached the clearing she was startled to notice a light among the trees. Dusk had fallen as she walked and a lamp was now being lighted in the hut. At the thought of Francis, whom she had supposed in London for the next few days, she caught her breath and began to cry, the clear conclusions of her walk shattered at once. Surely, surely they still loved; they could make amends to each other? Perhaps she could earn some money and relieve him of his degrading fear of responsibility. Surely these woods and hills had linked them in a natural marriage and would not allow this easy unbinding.

"Oh, Francis, Francis, it can't end like this," she whispered, and ran up the steps into the house.

Sikey rose from the wicker chair and stared at her. For a full minute they stood watching one another, pale and agitated.

"I thought"—muttered Valentine—"I thought—" and sat down, quivering.

"I had to come and see you," said Sikey.

There was a long silence. The other girl got up, stirred out the ashes of the fire and put the kettle on.

"I'll make some tea. Tea. A woman's remedy, isn't it? Well, Sikey, have you come to scoff?"

But in a moment they were in each other's arms.

"Oh, darling, don't."

"Darling too. The fact is," said Valentine, withdrawing, "I hate the whole world just now. I suppose Jane's told you I'm living with Francis, and that it's all going bad on us?"

"Is it?" Sikey's voice was anxious and almost timid.

They sat down again and looked at the fire, but their fingers were twined together.

"Humphrey wants to divorce me. And Francis is in craven fear. He just leaves me alone, and waits, and hopes. He can't believe his luck will fail him. And," said Valentine, poking the fire moodily, "it won't."

A plume of steam raced from the kettle's spout. She made tea and put the crockery on a tray, which she laid on a low stool between them.

"What are you going to do?" asked Sikey at last, still with that new timid note in her voice.

"Go. Go back to Jane, if she'll have me. And if you don't mind. Do you remember how happy we were, years ago? There's nothing I can trust to in the world but you and

Jane. Women are the only gentlemen nowadays. Have some toast?"

But Sikey was curled and sobbing in her chair, the black head hidden in the curve of her arm. Valentine dropped the toasting-fork and looked at the heaving shoulders. It was the first time in their lives that she had ever seen Sikey cry. What was the matter with the wench? But the pain at her own heart was a leash that held back the old swift rush of sympathy. She could only feel cold and curious.

"Are you unhappy too? What's the matter with us all I can't think. Whether it is that we don't believe on the Lord Jesus Christ or that we don't eat the right food. I don't know, but something fundamental is wrong. Sikey, what is it?"

A tumbled head roused itself. Sikey had wept herself pale, not red. Words crowded to her lips and hesitated there. She thought that the moment before important words are spoken swings like a pendulum between time and eternity.

"Valentine, how can I tell you? I'm with child by Francis."

Very carefully Valentine put aside the tray, as though it concealed something she needed to see, and fixed on Sikey a slow incredulous gaze.

"Don't look at me like that," whispered Sikey. "Upon my soul I never guessed—how could I? It began that very first evening, when you sent him with me to the station. He told me Jane had met him and disliked him, and asked me not to tell her anything. Until she gave me your letter saying you were living with him I had no idea—none. I've simply lived on the edge of suicide these last weeks. It's the most appalling thing to have happened."

"It is," said Valentine.

They both looked hopelessly into the fire and for a long while neither spoke.

"Does he know?" asked Valentine at last.

"No. That at least I've . . . you're the only person," stammered Sikey. "As soon as I understood, I wrote and told him I wouldn't see him again. How he ever hoped it wouldn't come out I can't think."

"Oh, that's all right, that's typical," murmured Valentine contemptuously. "He's got a sort of stupid improvidence, like the lies of a child or the thefts of a servant. That doesn't astonish me."

Sikey caught her hand. "Will you try not to hate me? It's so awful, I don't see how . . . Valentine, I'm utterly ashamed. Do you remember how you and Jane were always against my taking lovers? And it seemed so reasonable to me that so long as you didn't hurt anybody, there was nothing to be said against it. You know, in a way I feel no one can blame me for anything I've done, but in another way I feel guilty. I ought to have known. Only a coarse person wouldn't have known at once. I suppose that living carelessly *has* coarsened me."

A kinder look came into the other girl's eyes. "Do you suppose I blame any one but Francis? Sly and furtive—it's I who ought to have known. Do you love him, Sikey?"

The dark head tossed. "Not in the least. I was only amusing myself. That's where it's all so damnable, so ironic."

"Yes, you're with child by him and I'm not," cried Valentine. "Oh, what a mess, what a muddle. What are you going to do?"

This time the silence was longer than ever. Cinders fell from the stove; the air grew colder; almost it seemed that the room darkened, though the lamp still burned on, a bubble of white light.

"Let's cut clear," came from Sikey finally in a husky whisper. "You don't think he loves you and I know he doesn't love me. Love? It's silly to talk of it. He understands nothing but his own little piddling thrills. Oh, Valentine, it isn't good enough. Come back to Jane and me and begin again. After all, *you* won't be handicapped by a child."

"No." She twisted the wedding-ring about on her finger. "Sikey, just now I can't tell what it all means. I don't feel dependable in the least. There'll be times when I shall loathe you for this. I shan't mean to, but I shall. I agree to coming away. How long have you been pregnant?"

"Nearly three months."

"Do you feel ill?"

"Sometimes. I hate it," said Sikey with difficulty, "but I don't feel I can try to stop it. How we're both going to get through this year I can't imagine. We're in Jane's hands."

"Yes," agreed Valentine. "We'd go to bits without her."

After Sikey had gone to bed she gathered her books together from the sitting-room shelves, and looked round the room.

"How well I shall remember this ugly little room. It's burnt into my mind for life. That blue-painted dresser; the bookshelf corner where Francis keeps his pipe; the broken middle bar of the stove; the name, Larbert Range, above the oven; every knot of wood on the whitewashed walls. A gimcrack house, fit for gimcrack emotions only."

A wave of fury rushed through her as her eye was caught by a bundle of drawings lying on the dresser. She turned one or two over. Yes, this was the bed he had designed for her at the very time he was playing the lover with

Sikey. "Oh, very pretty, very pretty," she cried aloud, hurting herself. An idea occurred to her, and she smiled and nodded her head, as though in answer to some outer prompting. A part of her died with shame, and a part of her trembled in evil glee. Weeks of the man's work lay in her hand. She lifted up the iron lid and pushed them into the stove. Flames shot up and were crushed down as she replaced the lid. The fire roared. Shaking with misery and disgust, she flung herself into a chair and sat shivering there long after the stove was black and cold.

PART II: LONDON CLAY

TIME in London is shivered into varying shapes—cones, cubes, diamonds—split up by scattered meetings that drive like wedges into the day and break its natural flow. Only in the remote country does time present itself as a continuous stream, moment linked to moment and hour to hour: to the town-dweller that stream becomes a jewel-like shower of stray, discrete and bright, inducing frivolity and suggesting inconsequence. When pity or remorse can be set aside and heartbreak itself evaded by a telephone call which will summon friends or entertainment to be thrown up like an earthwork between ourselves and those dreaded emotions, is it surprising that we refuse to welcome such uncomfortable invaders of our peace, or that our hearts, so guarded, should perhaps forget their function and become unnecessary as an appendix? Escape; break up the sequence; for the burden of natural Time is too heavy to be borne.

People were sitting on cushions, lolling on couches, perched on the arms of chairs. Glasses were in their hands and an absence of happiness in their faces. The young men, affected and girlish-looking, were outnumbered by the women, whose keen intelligent faces, low shoes and low authoritative voices seemed to be possessed of just so much maleness as these had resigned. A reedlike youth clung to the mantelpiece, moaning gently at a group who were discussing a privately subscribed novel which contained all the words usually known as unprintable.

"These innocent little Anglo-Saxon monosyllables," he wailed. "What a fuss, what an aboriginal panic they throw decent people into. If anything's indecent it's that panic."

"And it's not as if they were profound words, significant words," some one suggested. "Not words that open a vista of terror before you."

"I *know,*" murmured Sikey. "Like solicitor, for instance."

The reedlike youth bowed his head, acquiescent, despairing; then raised it again. "And of course, quite half of them are onomatopoeic." Absently he crooned a tabooed word or two over to himself. The group drifted off, gasping for more drink as though for air. Sikey moved across the room to Valentine, who was talking very fast to a tall colorless creature with a mobile mouth and weak eyes invisibly lashed. She tugged her aside for a second.

"Darling, you're sure I don't show?"

"For the tenth time, you don't. Anyway, does it matter?"

She turned, murmured something to the colorless man, and drew Sikey away. It was a boring party—weren't all parties boring?—and it was straining her severely. Oh, the men, where were they? What had happened to them? Dead, were they? Dead in the war or dead since the end of the Renaissance, who could say? To look at them, they seemed all right, amusing still, busy making books or money or ticking out ideas for their own applause. But they were two-dimensional; painted walls. Look behind their strutting little façades and you came to the dark hollow of emptiness and fear.

"Sikey, just look at them. Is it worth it, I wonder?"

"Is what worth what? Damn you, Valentine, I'm pretending to enjoy myself. What was that frail thing you were talking to?"

"I don't want him. I'll give him to you."

"That shivering man. Thank you!" said Sikey. They both crowed with laughter, sardonic sexual laughter.

"Now where did I put my glass down? Astonishing, isn't it? No, Sikey, I mean—look at the women. Now aren't they vivid, individual, alive? Couldn't you almost fancy that there's a fixed quantity of energy, *libido,* what you like, in the world, so that if more is absorbed by women there's exactly so much less for men? And if this crop of rabbits and neurotics and tapeworms is the price we have to pay for women's freedom, Christ, I wonder if it's worth it?"

"Isn't that carrying determinism rather far? Oh, there's some one I must see," and Sikey rushed off again. She was grimly, desperately resolved on amusement. Self-disgust had thrown her off her balance for a while, but already she was able to be ironic about her physical predicament; she had dislodged her wit from the primeval slime and triumphed in separating it off from the months of gestation.

"Instead of submitting ourselves to the will of God," she reflected as she subsided into a noisy party on the floor, talking perfunctorily to screen her own thoughts, "we try to revenge ourselves on the universe by being clowns. If the whole thing is a joke of atoms then we'll get back on the inventor of the joke by laughing at him. 'Thought you'd make me take myself seriously, did you? Ha, ha, sucks to you, as they used to say in my schooldays.' The greatest modern convenience is that you can get round everything by being funny about it. And yet I'm not sure that being funny about things isn't as sentimental a way of escape as any other form of daydream. To pretend that the serious crises of our lives are intensely comic, as we all do, isn't either stoic or heroic, it's simply a cowardly dodging of maturity."

She began to attend to the talk about her. The drooping lily of a young man had collapsed upon the cushions, still clasping his glass of white wine laced with brandy. Poetry, he was arguing, must be as objective, as impersonal, as timeless, as the Pyramids or a Byzantine mosaic.

"Objectivity of the Sonnets, I suppose?" grumbled Valentine, who had strayed along after her. "Objectivity of *'O God from you that I could private be'?* Objectivity of *'O more than moon, Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere'?* Time-entangled subjectivity is what I'd call it."

"Oh, God, how boring you all are," said Sikey. She was beginning to feel ill. "Valentine, let's go home."

"All right. There was a lovely young man here half an hour ago who said he wanted to paint me, but he seems to have slipped through my fingers. Come along."

Two youths were parting with tender femininity on the steps.

"Wex darling, I'll bwing you back some flowers fwom Somerset."

"But I don't like flowers," objected Rex. "I only like trees."

"All wight, I'll bwing you back a twee."

Out in the square the night was cold and damp, gray-misted. Lamplight caught on polished knockers and the whitened edges of steps beamed on the lovely fanlights above the doors. The pavements were ruckled in mud. Just above the bare trees were the pinpoints of stars. They bundled themselves into a taxi and throbbed home through the empty streets.

"Parties are no good," muttered Sikey. "People are no good. I want to keep out of it at present. There's the child, and there's my book I'm only half-way through. I shall have to live like a cloistered nun. A pregnant nun," she added dreamily.

"Blast you," said Valentine.

Under the sloping roof they lay, side by side with a wall between. "Pregnant," considered Sikey for the hundredth time. "Gravid. Teeming. Coarse words for a coarse fact. Nearly four months. I suppose the little parasite has sex by now. Curious how calm one feels. I should always have expected to be racked with panic. All the same, it's going to be disgusting. I'm going to hate my body; it'll drag at me like a weight of lead, not for an hour or a day but all the time for weeks on end. I shall be ugly—heavy, repulsive and ugly—to every one and to myself. That's more horrible even than the thought of being torn and tortured. And all to what purpose? That another poor devil of a creature should travel from nowhere to nowhere for seventy odd years of folly and misery and pain. Well, why should I take the responsibility? Can I shuffle it off even now? No, I shan't do that, though God alone knows why I shan't. The only thing I'm thankful for is that I haven't a husband. Hasn't one always heard that pregnancies divide people more than they bring them together? Lord, how I should hate him. Every movement he made—free, unhampered—I'd feel as an insult to my own swollen belly. Thank God to be alone."

Below in the streets she heard the clatter of milk-bottles, the succession of clangs from a shunting train somewhere outside Paddington. She turned over, snuggled her chin into the pillow and fell asleep.

Valentine meanwhile was lying broad awake, staring into the dark. The last few weeks were like a bad dream from which she could not rid herself of the idea that she would presently wake up. It was at once impossible that she should see Francis ever again and unthinkable that she should not. The resolution to break, which her mind had taken, looked a flimsy structure when the wind of emotion began to blow. Already she was beginning to forget the nearer past; how his attempts to allay her fears had only stimulated her suspicions, how suspicion had corroded their relation like an acid until his very charm became repulsive to her, as though he paid his way through the world with bribes. Another cycle was completed and their early love was reviving in her mind. Something exquisite had been between them: forget the evil, then, and be grateful for the good. But if it had been good even in bits, why then hadn't she held to it? If good it had ever been at all, good it must be still; it couldn't be invalidated; something must still go on.

Fantastic! With Sikey pregnant, herself disenchanted and Francis only concerned to shuffle out of his responsibilities, what could possibly go on? Besides, that final furious gesture of burning his drawings had been less an attempt at revenge than an effort to close the gates firmly behind her so that they would admit of no return: she had meant it to be unforgivable and believed she could rely on him not to forgive. Very well then, it was all over. *The poor benefit of a bewitching minute* had left her experienced but despoiled, to pick up the threads.

"Pick up the threads. But how can I?" she thought. "What's left when I've lost Francis?" A feeling of utter physical loneliness came over her and she broke into a storm of helpless tears.

* * * * *

Jane sat and nibbled a pencil, corrected the proofs of an advertisement for the weeklies, spattered off a letter or two on the typewriter, and fell to nibbling again. The office had become a refuge for her, and she regretted admitting it even to herself. But the bald facts remained that she had a mental and a physical invalid on her hands, that peace and order had vanished from the flat, and that a cloud of impalpable gloom hung over it with which even her disciplined serenity of mind found difficulty in grappling. She remembered how Sikey had run out of the kitchen on Sunday morning after a sudden outburst of abuse. "You're priggish, self-satisfied; even your humility's the result of your pride. You force yourself to take an ant's eye view of everything and expect us to grovel beside you in our sins." And how Mrs. Palfrey the charwoman, washing up at the sink, had dried her hands and come towards her in an effort to keep the peace.

"It's because she's carrying, miss. You feel so evil-minded when you're carrying. My word, haven't I been through it! You feel everybody's against you and you're against everybody."

Poor old Sikey, sick, irritated, caught in the trap she had so contemptuously evaded until now. Of course she understood. But all the same . . . but all the same . . . Conscious that she was preening herself for being an arranger of life instead of a muddler through, Jane turned back to her work disgustedly.

"We're all in a bad way. There's no health in our lives. It's true they make me feel a bit priggish. I want to clear up the mess and see us all beginning to live decently again. But they're so deep in it that they think mess is the normal condition of existence."

The telephone rang.

"Hello. Yes. Yes. *Who* is it? Good Lord, Richard, I thought you were still living in the South of France."

A new-old voice sounded unfamiliarly across the wires. "I want to see you, Jane. I should particularly like to see you rather soon."

"Come to the flat, then. Come to dinner next week."

"Not before?"

"Sorry, Richard, I'm awfully busy. Come on Wednesday, can you?"

As she laid down the receiver the office boy came into the room. "*'E* wants you to go and take some notes for letters, Miss Napier. And would you have the proofs of that advertisement?"

Jane picked up pad and pencil. "Like a Surinam toad, with my young ones hanging all about me," she thought grimly. "It's very nearly time I began to have some life of my own." But something told her she would be a bearer of other people's burdens for as far ahead as she could see.

* * * * *

The chemist's shop smelt of rubber, disinfectants and pure drugs. A weighing-machine of spotless white enamel stood beside the door. Bottles, jars, and the glass counter caught and splintered the light. Two stupendous flasks, green and purple, with the swimming curves of a swan, were habilitated with the lost beauty they had worn to the eyes of childhood.

"This is a very good one," said the brisk chemist, holding out a hot-water bottle. He was a small man with a nutcracker chin and a jocose eye. "We guarantee the brand."

"But what can that possibly mean?" said Valentine, who had resolutely stopped asking herself the question, "What is it all for?" and was trying to prefer amusement to epistemology, since the sun was shining and even the region near the Portobello Road was blest by the first airs of spring.

"Mean?" said the little chemist, eyeing her quizzically. "I'll tell you what it means. These bottles—see how beautiful they are, miss; seamless rubber, snug as an orange in its skin—well, the firm had them tested. Yes, miss, by six of the Hippodrome chorus. Three of 'em sat on one end of the plank and three of 'em on the other, and they put the hot-water bottle under the plank in the middle. See-saw, see-saw, and believe me or believe me not, that hot-water bottle stood the strain. Last you a lifetime, miss."

But even the impertinent little chemist fitted into her misgivings as she walked out of the shop with a parcel under her arm. How did they know—not only young men whom she met at parties, but strangers in tubes and buses, greengrocers and little chemists? She wasn't an integrated being any more; she was a mere channel for sex to flow through, collapsing and breaking up under the rush of her own disordered emotions. A new young man, Karl Diedrich, a German painter, had rung her up and asked her to visit his studio that afternoon. And what with the worm man and the serpent sex, she knew what the result would be if she went. Her life had gone incoherent, dissolving from without, disintegrating from within.

She turned into the square past the porticoed houses. A russet poplar was budding in the garden, frail under the fine spring sky. New green would be coming out in plumes on the quickset hedges of the Culver Hills. There would be violets in the woods, so hauntingly purple that the eye sustaining their image fancied them in every shadow. In her heart echoed every note of the orchestra that was tuning up for spring. She had found in these joys a refuge from Humphrey, but they had been so much a part of her love of Francis that now their memory caused her only pain. There were certainly worse things than being unhappily married: that at least gave the blinding momentary delights of escape. But now that love had followed marriage into dissolution she felt that life had come to an end of its worth. The wise talked in ridicule of blue heavens, blue romantic distances, blue birds of happiness. But she couldn't admit a mere illusion of distance and blueness. She had once held happiness lying safe and warm between her hands. It had been, once, as real as her shoe or the ring on her finger. It had been, and was gone. She had to adjust herself to that one common fact: it had been, and was gone.

"Yes, you fool, you sentimentalist, remember that," she admonished herself as she climbed the long stairs to the attic room. "It's common, ordinary; the most ordinary experience known. It's happening all over the earth; it's happened before, in Crete, in Greece, in Carthage. *'Why lyked me thy yellow heyre to see?'* is the oldest question in the universe."

"Hullo," said Sikey, popping her head round the bathroom door. "Washing my hair. What's that you've got under your arm?"

"Hot-water bottle. I lost the stopper of the old one."

She sat down on the edge of the bath and watched Sikey as she rubbed up the clouds of lather over her black curls.

"How I know that experience," spluttered Sikey, soaping vigorously. "My soul is like some wonderful hot-water bottle of which the stopper is lost." Streams of water from the glittering geyser made channels through the lather and swept it away. Sikey bundled her hair into a towel and wrung it out, standing beside the window.

"There's a lovely crane at the end of the road," she remarked.

A long arm of filigree iron stretched across the sky; the ropes were threadlike as the weavings of a spider. A wooden cradle full of bricks hung suspended above the mean houses. Slowly it rocked down out of sight.

"Yes," murmured Valentine. "That's what I like. Cranes, tram-lines, underground railways. Pavements; telephone wires. Angles and hard iron. I wish I needn't even know the change of the seasons. And I never want to see another beechwood as long as I live."

"How do you feel, really?" Sikey sat down beside her on the edge of the bath and rubbed up her hair over her head with the towel. It stuck up in wet black points like an army of pen-nibs.

"Oh, there are moments when it isn't so bad. But really I'm obsessed, diseased."

"Still in love?"

"Not what people usually understand by love. It's much more like hate. Hate and contempt. I know that Francis is a rubbishy but attractive person, I know he's only harmful to me, and yet I want him still. But with such a rotten, hungry sort of wanting, like a craving for drugs. It makes me hate and despise myself even more than I hate and despise him."

They did not speak for a time. The tap dripped into the bath with a punctual tick. Sikey shook out her hair and began to fan it with a paper fan. Streamers waved and fell into curls again. Her face was flushed and preoccupied. Valentine, vividly struck by the thought that Sikey too had known Francis as a lover, followed her movements. She tried to hate the girl for her loveliness, for her casual attitude to sex, but she could not. Sikey was friend and ally still; the enemy was either within herself or elsewhere.

"Did you—what were your feelings about him?" she asked.

Sikey smiled derisively. "It'll never get well if you pick it."

But seeing Valentine's angered unhappy look, she moved along the edge of the bath and caressed her. "Darling, do understand. I don't like to talk about the things you hate in me. But really, I've forgotten already. To me he was just a man like another. We weren't very intimate, you know. I asked him nothing and he told me nothing, not even lies. And I haven't any marvelous memories. You know, sometimes at parties I meet men, and I think, 'Now did I ever sleep with you or didn't I?' And honestly I can't remember. It must be nearly seven years now since Alan and I broke off and decided we couldn't marry, and I've never loved anybody since; I've only amused myself. And it sometimes seems to me that the idea of love as pleasure is no worse than the idea of love as romantic torment or as housekeeping, which are its alternatives."

"That's all very well," said Valentine. "But what about the child?"

Sikey became thoughtful. "That makes a lot of difference. I never thought of wanting one, but now that it's happened I do feel curious and interested."

"But what I want to know is," persisted Valentine, "what about other men?"

"Oh, that," said Sikey, defending herself with affectation. "Well, as a matter of fact, I propose from now on to exist without that staff of life which the less enlightened commentators take to be bread."

She put her arm round Valentine and kissed her hair.

"Humph. It seems to me, Sikey, that I'm more like you now than you're like yourself," cogitated Valentine.

"So. You have come," said Karl Diedrich, grim and pleased.

"I've come," said she.

The studio in Fitzroy Street had a bulging window at the end, rounded like the keel of a boat. On one side there was a curtain of orange velvet; across the lower half of the other there were newspapers tacked down with drawing-pins. A tray with glasses and bottles of vermouth stood on the corner of a large table covered with papers, brushes, and pencils. There were sketches of arms, knee-joints, and small nude figures on the blotting-pad, the calendar, and on the backs of envelopes. Cloths colored to resemble a muddied rainbow were lying about on the floor. The room was untidy but not uncleanly, and its atmosphere was taut with the remorseless energy of its tenant.

"You like?" said Karl Diedrich. He had a long flat face like a dish, enlivened by gold-flecked hazel eyes, under eyebrows that slanted up from the bridge of his nose like accents grave and acute dashed in by a hasty writer. Mobile and expressive, they murmured an undertone of comic commentary on his fine brow and heavy chin.

"Um. So-so." The young woman sat down on the divan, stripped off her gloves, and surveyed him curiously. "Surely you're not entirely German?"

"No. No. My father," he used his English with difficulty, like an unfamiliar tool, "is German, but my mother she is from Sicily. They live not together."

"Ah! While in you the Latin lion lies down with the Teutonic lamb?"

"I have not understood."

From the way he turned unconcernedly to fill the glasses she understood the situation. He was assured from her visit to his studio that they were to be lovers; he wanted to paint her and to sleep with her, and he would waste no emotions on the matter beyond setting his will that it might happen so. What a remorseless young man he was. There was power in his heavy face, that lit and lightened so curiously, more power than she had thought was left in the world. But it was the cold, hard-striking power of ambition. It did not belong to her. She could imagine its resolute course, detained by nothing, turned by no one. But it would never be hers. Imagination pictured the course of a relation between them: the ice-cold disorder: nights of love, days of indifference or hate. A conspiracy of two servant-bodies to betray their master, Mind. How well she knew it all. Suspend the soul; hide the hostility; give the slaves their bread and circuses.

He picked up the evening paper which she had brought, and read out fragments from a gossip column in a labored voice eased with malice. "Lady Rosemary Mapledurham, who will be back in town next month, is very dark and dances the tango perfectly." "Every woman this season should ensure that she has a set of really good sham jewelry; it is as smart as smart can be." Guffawing loudly, he gleamed at her above the flimsy sheets. "Huh, huh, huh, how stupid, how idiotical, how childish. Oh, you English!"

"Have a cigarette," said Valentine, offering her case a little placatingly.

"I do not like. They bite in the nose."

Antagonized, they scowled at each other above the brims of their glasses. Whatever was to be between them it would certainly not be love, to judge by their angry mirroring of each other and their sulky unwilling vulnerability to desire, for perhaps we fall in love like Narcissus always, adoring the flattering image of ourselves which we meet in another's eyes.

But after he had told her of his plans—two years in

London, two in Berlin, two in Rome, since he had already studied in Paris—had expressed himself strongly on the southern element in his own nature ("All perfect art come from the south. It is only in the south that they can, how do you say, conserve the form; in the north they break the form to find the expression. It is because I am of the south, from my mother, that I shall be great"), had made love to her as though he resented the obscure compulsion, at last she faced him in pleasure through tangled hair.

"All the slip-slop cooing two-in-one . . . thank God we needn't. We're enemies really, aren't we?"

The mocking brows lifted. "Enemies? Perhaps. Tomorrow I begin to paint you, huh? You will drink again, not?"

Outside the window the long spring twilight visibly died behind the chimney-pots; in a yard below a woman could be heard scolding her child. "Ach, yer maungy little pot yer, whatcher mean by it?" Down in the streets men with barrows were crying old lumber and rags, in their harsh frayed voices. Light appeared in a window, and a man in shirt-sleeves pushed back the dirty lace curtains, propped chin upon hands and stared out. Each distant window when lit revealed another walled box of poverty and squalor. There was a metallic smell of the cooking of dried fish.

"Look at it," murmured Valentine, ignoring him. "Isn't it hideous? When outside things are as ugly as they can possibly be, life gets somehow safer. Once, you know, I played at being a child of Nature and quoted Donne in the flowering grass."

Karl Diedrich washed up the glasses and shook out the cushions with the vehemence of one who wishes to clear an event lock, stock and barrel from his mind.

"I have not understood," said he.

* * * * *

Richard Lacey, whose recently published *Speculative Essays* promised more than a seasonal success, was expected to dinner, and the three young women were stimulated by the thought of a visitor unfamiliar to one and unknown to the other two. They hurried from dining-room to kitchen and back again, fussing over the cooking, the table and the flowers. Sikey came down from the attic and the typewriter, and sniffed under the lids of the pans on the stove.

"Oh, food, food, lovely food. When they ask me the reason of my longevity I shall tell them I can attribute it to nothing but my lifelong habit of persistent over-eating."

She turned a little affectedly to Jane. "Darling, you're marvelous. *'Had I infinite worlds They were too little for thee.'* "

"Oh, darling," said Jane bashfully as she stirred the sauce. "Don't give me them. I could never keep them tidy."

Valentine scowled. "That sort of talk, it's the dead hand of the past."

"What? How? What d'you mean?" they demanded.

"We've grown out of it really. There's something about women together, especially if they've known one another as long as we have, that keeps them at a very infantile level. We were happy at twenty, and now, seven years later, we childishly try to reproduce the same conditions so that they'll bring back the old pleasure. But they won't." And she sauntered out of the kitchen in a mood of irritation, with Sikey for being advanced in pregnancy, with herself for the Karl Diedrich episode, with Humphrey, from whom she had just had a letter asking her to meet him in London. It was late spring now; the squares were fluttering with new leaves; in August Sikey's baby would be born. New leaves, new life, new beginnings; it was all nauseating to her. The promise of summer was an added torment from which she longed to escape down the black tunnel of winter. "You'd better paint me quickly, before I become a total hag," she had said to Karl. "Already I'm older than the universe." "Huh?" he had growled. "Are you intelligent or are you not? For if you are intelligent, it matters not if I do your portrait at thirty, at forty, at sixty-five. We have time before us." And suddenly he had kissed her in a rare moment of tenderness. "It is boring now—not? This sex, these bodies. They are cretinical, they tire me. We shall be good friends at sixty-five, I think."

She went upstairs to her attic room, and stood looking out over the ugly stuccoed houses and the tree-tops to the spires and the first stars. The past months had been a medley of disorder and pain. Once she had fancied herself blest beyond all the bounds of Nature; now she was lost, crazed, barred out from a paradise that had seemed her birthright and beating her life to pieces against the bars. She was in fact enslaved to the illusion of a past perfection, and the more perfect that past seemed, the less she could imagine how it would be possible to grow beyond it, since by its passing it had invalidated all other experience. Every relation she touched now was spurious, artificial and unnecessary. She wanted nothing; no more at all except to make an end.

But a dummy-self, artificially apt, popped up throughout dinner. Richard Lacey watched their gayety with penetrating eyes, the only sign of life in his parchment face. He was gray-headed and looked worn and ill.

"The pepper's in the salt-pot and the salt's in the pepper-pot," exclaimed Sikey. "That's the sort of household this is."

"Do?" said Valentine in reply to his question. "Why, nothing. I've a gift for doing nothing that amounts to genius."

"She does proofs and odd things for us when the fit takes her," Jane pleaded. "But she's a lazy devil, in love with her own ruin."

"I am," said the victim complacently. "Sloth rages through my life like a lust."

But soon his silence brought them to uneasiness. Why after all should they defend themselves with such frenzy? They exchanged glances, dissatisfied with the false impression they were willfully making and with themselves. And when disquietude had thoroughly subdued them, "Three merry little girls," observed Richard with the most deliberate provocation.

Over coffee they were beguiled into committing themselves. Jane sat mouselike and said little, but Valentine and Sikey were fluent.

"The trouble is," said Richard, "you're too intelligent to have a final faith in the pursuit of pleasure, but you're not intelligent enough for faith in the pursuit of—shall we use the obsolete word goodness? If you want to get a meaning back into life then you must look for a meaning instead of looking for pleasure."

They stared at him, glum with disbelief, and he laughed at their moody faces.

"I gather," explained Jane after he had gone, "that he would like to get us all back to a sort of enlightened medievalism: his whole philosophy is against the romantic and the sensational. He thinks we've been on a wrong tack ever since the Renaissance. And who are we to contradict him?"

Sikey lumbered out of her chair. "Oh, Lord, I know what he's up to. Life is evil in essence—renounce it and all that. Well, he's on a wrong tack. It suits women to be naturalistic: 'I love life; I want to hand it on.' What sense is there in 'I hate life, but it is my function to hand it on'?"

"Poor old Richard," said Jane as she collected the cups on to the tray and moved back the chairs. "He's ill, you know—got a most extravagant blood-pressure, and they say he may have a stroke at any time. His marriage was a disaster, and for the last few years he's been living down in the South of France with the child. The sort of life he lived down there almost crocked him up. And now that he's lived for more than a year under sentence of death his whole outlook has changed."

Valentine linked her arm in Sikey's; they stood together leaning against the mantelpiece, wary and mistrustful.

"Compensation," she declared. "That's all. He's ill, and therefore this world is all illusion."

"Compensation—that's a devil-born word." Jane relit the gas-fire which she had just turned out and sat down again, thoughtful. She held up her hands to the flame and watched the rosy outlines of her fingers. The other two subsided on the Chesterfield. "People use it now as though it were a checkmate in every argument, but I can't see that it's any more than fashionable jargon. I'm no philosopher, I'm just a plain common-sense female, but when I see people airily dismissing the problem of man's relation to God, which has preoccupied every age but our own, and pitying the past for its ignorance and superstition, then I can't help thinking of the doting mother when her son's battalion marched by: 'Eh, they're all out of step but our Johnnie.' "

* * * * *

Out at Twickenham the sky clearer, the air less full of smuts. Rows of smug little houses with bow windows and front doors variegated with Brummagem stained-glass in the upper panels, their front gates bearing a neat green plate, "NO HAWKERS, NO CIRCULARS," led down to a wooden paling, beyond which tossed the rose-white boughs of an orchard in bloom. Valentine walked up and down, surveying the suburban homes with a terrified eye. In her hand was a typewritten list of names and addresses with a wide column at their side headed "Remarks." There were ninety names on the list. She would have to provide ninety explanations why ninety Twickenham housewives had refused (for of course no one in their senses could expect them to agree) to buy the special brand of vacuum cleaner which, after three days' instruction in its mechanism and in the art of salesmanship, she was now being paid two pounds a week to canvass in the Twickenham district.

Women in frilled caps leant out from upper windows, shaking dusters into the sunny morning. A gramophone chugged punctually on a sitting-room table while its owner "did" the room. The butcher's boy went from house to house, whistling and distributing strawberry-colored parcels in transparent paper. Down at the end of the road, where the blossom showered passing snowfalls over the fence, a little knife-grinder was singing at his work; the sunlight flashed on the scissors he was grinding against his wheel. Existence in that Twickenham byroad was a closed circle of content, within which the merry housewives did their jobs; without which, blown round and round in a lost limbo like Paolo and Francesca, whirled hawkers, circulars, and the would-be seller of vacuum cleaners.

She stopped at a gate which had just been left open by the light-hearted butcher's boy, and with the sensation that her lower limbs were rapidly melting into a waxy fluid, she walked up to the door and rang the bell. A head popped out from above. Thank heaven, a servant, and a sheepish-looking slut, too.

"Yes, miss?"

"Does Mrs. Bousfield live here?" faltered Valentine.

"No, miss, Mrs. Greene. Mrs. Bousfield she let the 'ouse last month; she's gone to live in the country for the summer."

"Oh. Thank you."

She walked off, reprieved, and wrote, "Gone away" opposite the name on her list. It seemed an unauthorized impertinence to knock at the doors of strangers, to interrupt their work, to attempt to inveigle money out of their honest pockets to swell the bank balance of the proprietors of Magikleen Limited. How had she been such a fool as to think she was capable of it?

At the far end of the road a cart was moving, black with sacks. "Hen!" shouted the coalman conversationally. "Hen!" Occasionally, bored with his monosyllable, he burst into a full-throated chant. "Amee-co! Amee-co!" Valentine retreated hastily to the opposite end, where the little knife-grinder still chirruped and worked his purring wheel. Taking a deep breath, as though diving into icy water, she advanced on the first house and clattered the knocker.

After a short delay a fluffy little woman appeared, and dropped her head on one side like a bird.

"Ye-es?" she invited, smiling.

Valentine saw that she had presented a social and not a commercial train of ideas to the little woman, and floundered in confusion. "I'm—er—are you—I mean, is it Mrs. Farrell?"

"Yes," agreed that lady, still smiling socially.

Losing her head, Valentine brought out the abrupt statement, the word forbidden by every principle of salesmanship, until at least the twentieth sentence. "I'm selling vacuum cleaners . . . would you . . ."

The smile whisked from the little lady's face as though chased off with a broom. "Vacuum cleaners? Certainly not. More trouble than they're worth. But let me tell you this, my girl—there's been five of your lot round here in the last week, and if you want to drive the ladies about here real mad you've only got to say vacuum cleaner to them."

Slam went the door. Valentine, near to tears, smiled grimly and scribbled "Over-canvassed" in the margin of her list. But there were eighty-eight housewives still to be visited. Five more houses yielded similar results. By this time the coalman from the other end had overtaken her and they found themselves on the same doorstep.

"Business bad, missy?" He swung down the sack from his shoulders and pressed the electric bell.

She nodded.

"Then you just take my tip and try some other part." He was a tattered man, blackened from head to foot, except for his white gleaming eyeballs. His lips rolled back in a grin, to show another flash of whiteness.

"Take my tip," he repeated. "There's too many of your sort hereabouts. 'Tain't giving yourself a chance, missy."

"You don't think I can get people to buy any?" She tried to laugh even as she envied him for selling honest coal to supply an honest need.

But the coalman was earnest. "Not on your life. It *is* vacuum cleaners, I s'pose?"

"Vacuum cleaners?" echoed the stout woman in an overall who had just opened the door behind them. "Have you come about the vacuum cleaner?"

"Yes," said Valentine humbly.

"Oh, do come in," said the woman with eagerness. "I was sorry to be out when you called the other day. The fact is, I talked it over with my husband and we agreed it was time we had one; it would save me a lot of trouble and I'm not so young as I was."

She led the way through the passage into a little kitchen trim with chintz curtains; the stove glittered like a mirror; a cat lay curled upon a cushioned chair.

"Now I'm sure you must be tired and hungry. Sit down and have a cup of coffee with me."

In astonishment and relief, Valentine sat down. No need to roll off persuasive patter: "I've a nice little machine I'd like to show you. It isn't really on the market yet, but I could get you one at a special price—does everything—sweeps the room; dusts the furniture; cleans your clothes; dries your hair—saves you all the bother of rubbing it for half an hour with a towel . . ." No need to do anything but relax for a time in this shining kitchen while a kind-eyed woman opposite her chatted in pleasure to see another human being and beamed as she handed her a coffee-cup, explaining how dull life was with a husband, son, and daughter at work all day and at play all evening. The stranger's presence stimulated her to confidences; photographs were brought. "That's me on my wedding-day. You'd never think it to look at me now, would you?

And that's little Robbie when he was three—such a bright little chap he was too. Now he cares about nothing but money and cars—buy a new car every week if he could. And Gladys she's mad about dancing, always out with her boys; look at this one, a pretty girl, isn't she? But they won't stop at home, you know. I do all I can, make it nice for them, but you'd think home was a prison-cell by the way they treat it. And it's lonely for me. They don't think of that; a good time's all they want and they don't think of me. And yet, you know, they don't seem to manage to enjoy themselves, somehow. I often wonder if they're going the right way about it. But there!"

She refilled her visitor's cup, suddenly curious.

"You'll excuse me, I'm sure—but this doesn't seem to be like your sort of job. How do you come to be doing it?"

Valentine's eye wandered to the cuckoo-clock among the jars on the mantelpiece, to a picture of a smirking cat with a bandaged eye and an enormous bow at the back of its neck, and she knew that it was not possible to explain. Again she looked from the cuckoo-clock to bandaged cat, suddenly aware how lost she was, how far from the small securities of normal life. Why try to sell vacuum cleaners, to make money to buy food to keep life in her body? For months she had been going round in circles, tortured, damned. She saw in a flash that it was all useless, that death was waiting for her like a door ajar. Stupidly she smiled.

"Do forgive me—it's not my job at all really—I did it for a bet. But I'll get the Magikleen people to send some one along to give you a demonstration."

She got up, dazed with the knowledge that she meant to die. A bar of light lay across the kitchen table; she blinked at it unsteadily. Her hostess rose and pushed the photographs out of sight. She had exposed herself and been hurt. Puzzled and reproachful, she shook her head at the seller of vacuum cleaners. "You shouldn't do things like that," she said, hardly knowing what she meant. "You shouldn't do things like that."

"Oh, if you knew," cried Valentine. Out of the house she ran, but not in time to stop the tears that poured without warning down her cheeks.

Pleading headache, she went to bed early, leaving dinner untouched. No need to pretend; she felt genuinely ill, feverish and aching in every limb. It occurred to her that perhaps no human being could contemplate suicide without producing a high temperature in themselves, and this seemed to her so amusing that she was obliged to sit down on the bed as she rocked with laughter. Down in the kitchen was the clatter of dishes, and the voice of Sikey talking to Jane. The window-curtain flapped aside in a puff of wind, and the light streamed whiteningly out on to the gray stone parapet. She looked out at the pale London sky, cut by spire and chimney-pot. A lorry jolted by, shaking the flimsy houses. Her whole life seemed to her a story she had read long since. Two people discussed it in her hearing like a book. "That was how it ended, then?" "Yes, that was how it ended." She turned out the light, lay down on the bed and shut her eyes, waiting. So vacuous was her mind that she wondered the walls of her head did not begin to fall in because of the emptiness within. The household noises went on. Jane came upstairs and turned on a bath. There was conversation on the landing.

"Is there a light in her room? Shall I take her some aspirin, do you think?"

"No, it's out. Perhaps she's asleep. I shouldn't go in."

The bathroom door shut and she heard no more. Presently footsteps trotted down to the floor below. "Good night, darling." "Good night, Jane."

Everything was still. She sat up in bed, half suffocated, as though she had held her breath, listening, for too long. A deafening noise came to her as of something approaching with great jolts and she realized it was the beating of her own heart. Was it time yet? Was it time?

Quietly she got up and closed the window, then switched on the light and tried the tap of the gas radiator. It was very loose; you had only to push the leg of a chair against it and it turned on as though by accident. There was no chimney, no vent to be stopped up except the space under the door, which fitted badly and was raised a good half-inch above the floor-boards. She had forgotten that and stood looking at it with a frown. A couple of scarves would do. Twisting them to the thickness of a rope she stuffed them under the door. Obviously they were premeditated, not accidental: how could she counter that? Leave a note. She scrawled on a piece of paper, "Take away the scarves and destroy this," and laid it on the dressing-table. It was beginning to be difficult to think, because it seemed to her that she had not laid a note on a table but had taken a bishop with her knight in a particularly complicated game of chess. Now that of course was stupid. Cautiously, whisperingly, she tried her voice. "Valentine. Valentine, you're not playing chess. You're not playing chess, do you hear, you're—" but there she stopped. Quiet, quiet. It was going to be easy, not difficult at all, if only she could stop that wild mad thing that tore like a bird within her breast. She undressed, threw her clothes on a chair which she pushed up against the gas-tap, switched off the light and got into bed, quivering like a tree in a storm. A faint metallic smell of gas began to permeate the room. The rigidity of her limbs relaxed slowly, slowly; she had the sensation of petals folding to a center.

Something pounded crashingly towards her: was the world ending? It seemed to engulf her, to pass and go over. Dimly she realized that a heavy van had gone down the road. Behind their lids her eyes fluttered excitedly. Blindness, dumbness, immobility came over her in waves. Each time she swayed back to a crest of awareness she was flung to a deeper trough of unconsciousness and stayed there longer. Now she was walking in a wood after rain. It had not the familiar smell of sodden leaves but had a smell no less familiar which somehow she could not recognize; spattered with wild sunlight, it steamed like a pudding set to boil on the hob. Through the trees came a dark figure: was it Francis? She tried to catch sight of his face but though he seemed to be approaching her she could discern nothing; it was as though she pursued a faceless ghost. If she could get away from the trees it might be lighter. But the wood's gloom grew and spread. She was rocking, rocking, down into the dark. From the black quiet that cradled her a human shape formed itself: a girl, exquisite, flushed, stepping from an archway into the spring sun. Muffled memory stirred. What was her name? Years and years ago she was: years and years ago. A walk with her governess through the village, prim and hateful; the gloves tight on her little hands, the elastic of her hat eating into her chin. And suddenly that rose-white girl with gleaming hair and ardent glance, moving into the light. She had struggled to tug her hand away, to speak to the enchanting being who hovered like a summer cloud at the entrance to the cobbled yard; the governess held her back with a restraining arm. "My dear child, it's no one you know. It's old Elstob's daughter—Elstob the boot-mender."

The darkness began to close finally above her. "O daughter of Elstob the boot-mender—O beauty I have never found in all this envious life—forgive, forgive."

Thunders rose in her ears; noise that racked the hearing. "Sikey! Sikey!" cried Jane's voice. Suddenly there was movement, violence, light. Some one was working her arms, bringing her back to a world of effort and unendurable pain. "Let me alone," sobbed Valentine. "Let me alone." Her eyes were unseeing; everything crashed and swam about her.

"Downstairs to your room," said Sikey. "I'll take her other arm. Don't let her sit down."

Doors banged; windows banged. She was still swirling about in outer space, in rings and circles. Everything had gone black, edged with purple like the bloom on a grape and rolling like a sea.

"She's coming round," Jane said, breathless.

"Going to be sick," grunted Valentine.

But after she had recovered a little they would not let her go: they walked her up and down in front of the open window, while the tears streamed and she whimpered and protested. The fit of sickness returned; then another; finally they propped her up in a chair and administered black coffee.

"You don't think we need drag a doctor into this?" asked Sikey.

"No, she'll be all right," said Jane. "But we can't let her go to sleep till the gas-poisoning's out of her. Will you take it in turns with me to walk her about till morning?"

"Don't talk as though I weren't there," put in Valentine. "I am, very nearly." She stared up with dazed eyes. "What happened?"

They came and sat each on an arm of her chair. "You mustn't do this ever again, Valentine," Jane said fiercely as she stroked the girl's arm. "It's a damned mean cowardly trick. If I hadn't remembered I'd left my watch up in the bathroom, you'd have done Sikey and me the greatest injury that's in your power. Because Francis has hurt you, why should you hurt us?"

"Don't ask me questions. I shall only be sick again."

She began to nod and her eyes closed. Jane pulled her out of the chair and walked her up and down the room. A distant clock struck one. Morning was still far away. The hours crawled on, unreal as a nightmare. Sometimes Jane and sometimes Sikey was at her side, tramping through the rooms of the flat. Familiar objects—a work-basket, an electric light standard, a picture or a gramophone cabinet—leered at her through the physical and mental fog that deflected her mind. "I'm so tired, so tired," she implored them now and then. "For God's sake let me sleep."

"Not yet," was the answer, and they urged her on through endless hours of walking with weighted feet. At last the May dawn glimmered behind the blinds. Sikey switched off the lamp and they stood at the sitting-room window. The faintest light was in the room; shapes of furniture could be dimly distinguished. Below the window were the street-lamps and the breathing trees of the square; a flushed sky was above the houses.

"I believe you've finished being sick," Sikey declared after a time. "Let's go out."

Out they went into the strange London morning. It was too early for the milk or the post; the streets were utterly empty. The moon's last quarter haunted the middle of the paling sky like a ghost. Aspen-leaves shuffled in the square. Presently the slanting rays of the new-risen sun gilded the chimney-pots and the long roads that ran from east to west.

A cat was sitting on the pavement washing itself; it ignored them as they passed and went on rubbing its paw over its face. In front of the dairy a lorry had drawn up, crowded with milk-churns; two men rolled them on their bases along the pavement; they shouted to each other as though exhilarated by the noise with which they filled the quiet street. Valentine watched it all, vague and interested, as though Bayswater were a foreign town. Life began to stir in the clifflike houses; servants shook mats against the area railings and knelt down to wash the steps. Underneath the shame and the degradation which she felt and which made her unable to meet Sikey's eyes, a weak and new-born pleasure filled her heart to see the leaves shifting in the mild May light.

* * * * *

Change was in the air. The shock of Valentine's attempt at suicide had precipitated in Sikey a resolve to go and live with a woman friend in the country for the last ten weeks of her pregnancy. She had signed an agreement with her publisher for her study of the Economic Disorganization of the Family, which had been finished now a couple of months ("Not a neck and neck race with the baby after all," she had observed on taking the last sheet out of her typewriter) and was to appear almost at once. She had obtained an advance on it and had also been able to place a series of articles, so that the money question was no longer urgent, and she had abruptly disappeared into Hampshire, announcing that she proposed to have her baby in a country nursing-home. Meanwhile Jane had been trying to persuade Valentine to leave the flat for a time and take charge of Richard Lacey's cottage and his small daughter, for Richard himself was anxious to put in a few weeks in London and disliked the idea of leaving the child in the care of a housekeeper. Valentine, still dazed and humiliated, had at first refused, but very soon she had weakened and was almost ready to agree. The prospect of departure from the flat had made her consent to see Humphrey, and she was now waiting, on a rainy morning, for the arrival of her husband.

Since the night she had tried to do away with herself a state of physical vagueness had persisted; she would stare at an object until it seemed to melt and fuse before her eyes. She was apathetic, stupefied; all the forces of life had been deadened.

"She's not at all well, miss," averred faithful Mrs. Palfrey to Jane. "Her eyes look quite dowdy-like. If she could get away it might give her a new start-off."

Now she sat vacantly listening to the trinkle of rain on the windows and smoking one cigarette after another: a bowl beside her was gray with ash and rubbishy with matches and fag-ends. It was cold, and she had been obliged to light the gas-fire. Dreamily she stared into it. The asbestos towers enclosed the living jets of gas as the branches of a tree enclose the sap. Within the purple-yellow flame glowed tiny buds and nipples of warmth. A slow respiring breath came from it like the continuous murmur of a sea-shell.

The bell rang and she heard Mrs. Palfrey go down to answer it. The door opened; Humphrey walked doubtfully in. They faced each other with hesitation, not knowing how to begin. He looked down at his shoes; she twisted her ring.

"How long have you been back in England?" she asked at last.

"About five weeks."

An awkward pause succeeded. She wondered if he had come to see her in order to make up his mind whether to divorce her or not.

"Well," he said. "How are you getting on? What are you doing now?"

"Now? I tried to sell vacuum cleaners for a bit," she said in a toneless voice.

"Vacuum cleaners?" It seemed to irritate him. "Why that? Why didn't you get a proper job? Secretarial, or something?"

"The agencies won't take my name," plodded the dull voice. "They think that five years out of harness isn't a very good recommendation."

He moved his feet in impatience. "I suppose you mean I ought to have sent you money. Well, why should I, when you were living with another man? Are you still living with him?"

"No."

She stooped down to turn the fire lower, so as not to see his face. How tired she felt, how empty and exhausted: all she wanted was never to see Humphrey again as long as she lived. It amused her to think that she could have appealed to the law of the land to make him maintain her, that she could force money from him even now, that she could plead and prove a connivance which would make him ridiculous in any divorce court, and that something in her stood back in pride and contempt: let him do what he liked, she would not lay a finger on the gross machinery of the law. Casting her mind back to the days of their engagement, she remembered his sentimentality over her lack of concern about money. "How wonderful to be poor together. How marvelous of you not to mind!" Yes, he was sentimental still, unreal, a man of straw. She came to herself with a flicker of spite.

"That's awkward for you, isn't it? What about this divorce you want?"

Silently he folded his long hands over his knee, feeling baffled and angry. He would have been at a loss to explain his own desires. The long months of absence had proved unexpectedly sterile, and he was beginning to fear that he was monogamous by nature. On every hand there had been the promise if not of new love at least of fresh adventure, but it had veered and passed him by. The more worldly and experienced the women he met, the more he felt thrown back on his old defenses of hate and the less free from the only serious relation he had ever formed; but now he was split up into a clamoring horde of Humphreys, who shouted, "Get her back!" "Divorce her!" "Hurt them both as much as you can." "Play for safety; things may come right," until he was bewildered by the conflict within. He would have to wait and see how the conversation shaped itself.

"You do want to divorce me?" she persisted.

Now that he observed her more nearly, he saw that she had changed. Her hair and skin were lifeless; a network of ravaging lines was spun round her eyes. It gave him a sense of satisfaction and security, as though some Old Testament god were on his side.

"Yes," he said. "I think we'd be better apart."

The gas-fire purred and filled the long pause that followed. His wife gazed before her, vague, uninterested, almost stupid.

"And I'll damn well make Merryweather pay for it," he added, brutal under a feeling of defeat which he could not understand. "He's a worthless fellow. Do him good to suffer for the damage he's done."

At that she smiled. "It would take a cleverer man than you, and a cleverer woman than me, to make Francis Merryweather suffer. No, Humphrey, if you want to divorce me, you must have another co-respondent than Francis. And I'll give you any evidence you want."

In one of the old rages he walked up and down the room. She saw epitomized in him all the shrewishness of his mother and the unbridled violence of tongue and temper which characterized the Spens family. Unhappy Humphrey, as logical and as irresponsible as the answer to a sum.

"I'll divorce you because of Francis Merryweather or I shan't divorce you at all," he cried. "My God, he's spoilt you, he's made you what you are. Any one can see how sensual and vicious you've become. Well, I'll make him pay for it."

"You can't if I won't let you," she answered dully, still wearing that new stupefied look. "I don't believe you've got the evidence. And if you had, I think I could prove connivance. Don't you realize that a husband who urges a lover upon his wife loses the right to claim injury when she takes one? No, Humphrey. I'll give you other evidence—if you want to divorce me you can—but you'll leave Francis out of it."

Again a silence fell. At last he resumed, in a changed voice. "I never thought you'd have given him up. That alters everything. Look here, Val, can't we . . . can't we . . . I'm sorry I lost my temper. But if there's an end of that idiotic business, Val, I'm willing to start again."

She did not answer.

"To tell you the truth, I've been damned lonely without you. And I do have some sort of feeling of being married to you; I can't go to other women. I'm willing to try to make a job of it if you are."

"Oh, what nonsense," she muttered, looking away. "You hated me a moment ago, and in another you'll hate me again. You don't know what you want, Humphrey. As a man you've got no meaning whatever."

He went rigid and moved towards the door. "I see it's no use. I need hardly have expected you with your double-sized ego to understand generosity. I was prepared to forgive you."

"Since you can't revenge yourself on Francis," she said, breaking into a rush of unbalanced laughter. "Forgive me, Humphrey, but your generosity isn't at all easy to accept."

Without another word he picked up his hat and gloves and stalked out of the room.

* * * * *

Francis Merryweather was a man of half measures. He never behaved wholly admirably and he never felt himself more than half to blame. Nor did he ever more than half-analyze his motives and intentions, dimly aware that the half-light, half-fog in which he conducted his dealings almost justified his claim that those developments of his life which were fortunate to himself were the result of luck rather than calculation, and that those unfortunate to others were entirely unforeseen. A version of his late amorous episodes which denigrated neither his charm nor his integrity was absently pondered and tucked into his memory and he dismissed the matter as far as possible from his mind. Six months of new activities and interests had blotted out any slight misgivings which at first he felt, and it was with a shock of blank surprise that he found a letter from Valentine awaiting him one morning at the workshop. At first he could hardly tell what his reactions were. Remembering her abrupt departure and the burning of his drawings he tried to draw up a flame of resentment from the bottom of his mind, but at the same time he was aware that (except for that unforeseen act of destruction) it had all fallen out very much as he had wished, and that his life would never have turned into its present convenient channel unless she had left him. So far so good. But he could hardly prevent himself from feeling a hint of interest and curiosity at hearing again from a woman with whom the sensual tie had once operated as powerfully on himself as on her. A correspondence which (he admitted to himself in moments of candor) appeared very poor fencing was resumed, and he was not too deeply startled to find himself one July morning setting out to meet her at Waggoner's Water. Whistling gayly, he strolled along the white roads, overhung by the oppressive boscage of summer. Behind the aspiring flowers in the cottage gardens—lupin, larkspur and hollyhock—the raspberry bushes were netted in old curtains of Nottingham lace. Now and again he would pass the leathery body of a frog, squashed flat by a moving wheel into the July dust. He felt vivid and full of life, so that the mere act of observing the bushes or the dead frogs, and noticing that he observed them, gave him an unaccountable pleasure.

Valentine meanwhile was walking slowly toward their meeting-place from the other side of the hills. A dull misery clogged both thought and movement as she asked herself what on earth she could expect from this encounter and found no answer. The outside way to it had been cleared by Sikey's disappearance from the flat and the geographical fact that Richard Lacey's cottage at Dewberry

Common, where she was now living, was barely three miles from Waggoner's Water and seven from the tarred bungalow on Heron Hill. But the closest geographical proximity was nothing if the inner way had not also cleared itself in her mind. And that it was clear meant only, she supposed, that the pain and meaninglessness of her life had become unbearable. But since the night she had turned on the gas something seemed to have altered; the old clamoring resentments were stilled. Liar and philanderer she knew Francis to be and she dismissed it now as irrelevant; if he was still important to her it was unfortunate, but not a matter that could be changed. In her new state of vagueness and softness she desired to heap all possible blame for the past upon herself—she had been possessive, harsh, suspicious, distrustful; her suspicions had fed the baser elements in him.

"Personality is fluid, not solid. Believe a person loyal or treacherous, compassionate or callous, and loyalty or treachery, compassion or callousness, are increased in him. This is the heaviest burden, the deepest responsibility, that any human being has to bear. I am, in fact, my brother's keeper. I am responsible for the rottenness in Francis. My contempt for him was a shield to myself but a wound to him. That it was true or deserved makes no difference. The result is the same: *Evil has been increased.*"

On she walked, blind with thought, unaware of the course of the road that burrowed its way through tall beech forests where wood sanicle like blown spume swirled about their roots, and delivered itself at last on to the high wide common of Waggoner's Water. "Oh, my love, my love," she murmured, "be friends with me—let us only be friends." But she did not notice that she had said "my love" nor did she raise her eyes to see the slight brown figure that loped across the turf to meet her. A few yards off he hailed her with a shout.

"Hallo, you! Ain't you going to know me again?"

She stopped and gazed at Francis Merryweather standing beside a furze-bush in the summer light, and at once she was dazzled and appalled with disappointment. In a moment her tight-strung mind adapted itself, turned the situation round. It was, of course, the shock of his disappointment that she felt, not her own. She had forgotten, at the sudden point of meeting, how changed, how ravaged she was; how altered from the Valentine he had known. Waiting with downcast eyes, she tried to still that icy quiver in her heart: "Is *this* Francis? *This* the person there's been all the fuss about? Am I really breaking my heart about this insignificant little dark man?" And the rush of relief, of disbelief, was so powerful that she had to bite her lips so that she should not burst into hoots of mannerless laughter.

"Come on," said he, regarding her oddly. "We'll get a bit of lunch at the pub."

Passively she let him conduct her to the weathered old inn where two years back she had stayed with Jane, and as she faced him across beer and sandwiches in the parlor, and played as then with the bobbed fringe of the tablecloth, it seemed that the whole thing was a dream and she wondered when she was going to wake up and begin to live in earnest. Watching his movements as though each gesture indicated a reprieve from what she had expected to be unending agony, she understood that life was going to be second-rate from then on. No trick of hair-twisting or boiling eggs in the kettle, no bright glance or illumined talk would ever have that significant bloom upon it that it had once had in the past. It was not after all a life sentence: in the end she would be free. It did not occur to her that long before that she might be so crippled by her chains that she would prefer to go on wearing them as an outer and immediate explanation of her disabled state.

"Well," said Francis, taking her hand, "what's it all about?"

"You," she replied like an automaton.

"Oh, come," he cried. "You can't mean to tell me after six months that you've anything more to say to me?"

"Haven't I?" said she.

They sipped their beer for a time in silence. A fly whizzed about in the air; scraps of argument floated in from the taproom outside.

"If yew can proove," said a tired voice, trailing its vowels, "that a right of waay has existed for three yeears, without the proprietor saying nothing—"

"Aye, but the tiggly bit about it is—" interrupted a brisker voice. A door slammed and they heard no more. Francis pushed his glass aside and ran his hand along her bare arm; hedged about with indifference as she fancied she was, she allowed it; a thrill shot through her, unpremeditated and violent. There in the stuffy parlor he began to make love to her. "It's no use, it's all wrong, I know he doesn't love me any more," she thought. "But all the same I believe we're both helpless the moment we're together. We're cut from the same piece of stuff and that's all about it."

"Well," said Francis, embracing her, "you went off: you did as you liked: how was I to know what you felt?"

She pondered it as her fingers still toyed with the fringe of the cloth. Perhaps after all she was not wholly victim, but a willful young woman, brought to passivity, fatality, only in this.

"We've been so much to each other," she murmured. "We can't be just nothing or all life is a lie."

There was silence. He got up and went to the door. "I'm going to have another pint of beer. Damned good beer they give you at these Culver pubs, don't they? The London stuff's all mucked about with chemicals. Another glass for you?"

She shook her head. After the innkeeper had brought in the beer, wiped the bottom of the glass with his stained apron, mentioned the weather and the harvest, and departed full of reluctance and curiosity, Francis turned towards her once more. Moved though she was, she observed him again with the same dismay as in that first moment out on the common. There was a new and disquieting quality about his glance that made her ashamed of her passion for him; a brazen look, stripped of the element of shyness and mystery that had once so allured her. He sat down beside her and put his arm about her shoulders.

"There's another woman, you know."

She received the statement with neither surprise nor shock; it was indeed as though she had known. Effortlessly she began to laugh.

"Another woman? There always was; there always will be; what does that matter?"

Her attention was not on her words but on his face. It was really impudent, coarse and impudent. No, perhaps it was less impudence than *impudeur,* and there was something strangely shocking about it: this impudence, this *impudeur,* was the reflection of the fevered attempts of a man no longer young to stimulate his own sensuality.

"I'm married," he added, brushing her neck with his lips. A quiver of delight, inevitable, almost mechanized, ran over her at the touch.

"Does she know what you are?" she said, without accent or expression.

He chuckled. "Not so well as you do, my dear."

But as she sat there smiling at him and listening to the shuffle of feet in the emptying taproom and trying with an idle finger to push back the stuffing of the horsehair couch which protruded from its frayed edge, her inmost spirit was bowed down with grief. *Naught's had, all's spent,* indeed. She was committed to the course of a fatal malady, a physical obsession in which her mind did not participate and which compelled the finer impulses of her being into an extreme of spiritual torment.

"Finished your glass? Then come on out into the sun."

He paid, and out they went; the innkeeper looked at them wryly as they stood blinking at the early afternoon light in the doorway after the dim low room within. Away from the scattered cottages they strolled across the short turf with its thistles spread like star-fishes, its golden patches of stonecrop and blown rockrose, to the shelter of the high furze that rose like an island in the deep green sea of bracken that washed over the common. From a fold of the hillside came the short clipped chink of a goat-bell. The sound brought back to Valentine a past that seemed incomparably more real than the present. She looked enquiringly at the man by her side.

"We're moving the workshops to Battersea in September," he remarked. "Can't go on living up here in the winter, you know. We've got a flat in Chelsea already, so it'll be convenient. Of course I shall keep on the bungalow for week-ends. When are you coming to stay there? In the autumn?"

"Am I to do that?"

"If you like."

At the end of an alien silence he caught her in his arms, and the old known tide of excitement rose between them.

"You're mine, you're still mine," he cried in triumph. "We'll be lovers every time we meet, just as we always used to say we'd be."

"I meant us to be friends," she said with closed eyes.

"Friends? When we can give each other such a damned good time?"

She gave a shiver of secret desolation, still with eyes closed so that he should not guess her thoughts. In a way she was grateful that he had not refused himself to her; that he was presenting her with a new and intimate knowledge of himself which yet might prove her cure. But how much further, before the end should come? Her journey through time had gone dark and weighted; staggering through tunnels, wading through mud. That last attitude so painfully come by, of gratitude for the past and acceptance of the pain, had been a made-up one from the head: at the first test her beyond-possession theories had broken down. She would have to take the whole affair to pieces and begin again.

"Well, are you going to come and see me in London?" she said as they parted on the footpath that led across a cornfield in the direction of Dewberry Common.

"Am I to do that?" he mimicked.

They paused, listening to the hoarse murmur of the ripening wheat, with its sea-tinted stems and amber ears. The sun was still high, the shadows of hedges were short on the fields, the day was idyllic as those of the happy past that linked and alienated them at once. She wondered if she had the strength to see him no more. Either choice filled her with despair. Life with the seeds of death in it, or death with the seeds of life in it, which to choose? This then was what love could come to, despoiled of every human attribute but the itch to touch and cling.

"Oh," she cried in sudden hopelessness, "how is it possible to endure life, once you know what it's really like?"

"Rot, my dear girl. D'you suppose a man gets any less boozed on a few pints of beer, just because he happens to know that malt and hops have gone to their making?"

She looked up at his handsome, slightly wizened face. It was harder than she had pictured it, the line of the mouth thinner, the nose more of a beak. Could anything in the world break up his animal wholeness, so that one day out of the wreckage there might emerge some vestige of the human spirit? Nothing, she knew it. He was the natural animal, no more, no less: perhaps too an animal instrument in a drama he could not see.

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Sikey lay and moaned. The August night was stifling and she felt consumed with heat and pain. This, then, was the hour before which imagination had quailed whenever she had thought of it in the past few months. "What's the good of living it through more than once?" she had admonished herself with great sense, and had shepherded her mind away to pleasanter fields. Now she knew that the worst pain she had ever imaged was a mere needle-scratch to this. She forgot its reason and its consequence; nothing existed but an absolute of irrational pain, which brought with it new time and new conditions like a foreign country. At one moment when its grip slackened she thought, "I must be dead. This is eternity. When there's a day of twenty-four hours, you need only support a minute of it at a time. But now the whole of time falls on one's back at once. Oh, God, this is ghastly. Why have I never seen that eternity is hell and hell eternity?"

The tide of pain began to rise again; she dug her nails into her hands in an effort to bear it. Under the shaded light there was the flicker of a white dress; the night-nurse came and stood beside her, starched and competent. She had seen it all a hundred times before; her chief concern was that it should conform to type. But everything was going on very well. She bent over and wiped the sweat from the girl's face with a fat little hand that puffed out from the tight sleeve, padded and springy like a cushioned seat.

"Put out the light," gasped Sikey, clawing at her dress. With a bright smile the nurse released herself.

"Now we'll just see how long this pain lasts—then I'll know whether to wake Sister or not."

The shallow-set eyes in her cheerful expectant face moved from the bed to her wrist-watch and back again.

"Devils in hell, timing the agony," thought Sikey as the pain ripped through her. But presently she lay released and breathless on the pillow, and the white devil dwindled into the familiar night-nurse who nodded and said, "I'll just run and wake Sister."

She pattered out of the room. The tortured young woman on the bed glanced at a jar of roses on the dressing-chest; one of them, overblown, was flaking into creamy petals round the jar. On the table lay a wispy lace-edged nightdress which she had been sewing during the afternoon before her pains began. The sight of the flowers and the dainty lace sickened her; in her present state everything sweet or gracious seemed full of falseness and sentimentality. She perceived that life was dirty and degraded in its first conditions, and that any attempt to ennoble it gave the lie to its own root, the essential agony of childbirth.

The moment of respite was over; those unimaginable pains were tearing her body afresh. She heard a sound like an animal shrieking and could not believe that it came from her own throat. People were in the room: sightless with pain, she felt their presence but could not see. "Nothing's worth this—let the world end," she muttered. Then her conscious mind flickered and died out in the blind last lap of pain.

Sun touched the edge of the washstand and made the glass top glitter. The curtain moved in the air of a summer morning. Every trace of the night's horror had been cleared away. "Nurses—they're clever scene-shifters," thought Sikey dimly, pushing a black curl out of her eyes. She lay in her white bed, filled with weak joy to be out of pain. A small wizened bundle of infancy was in a cot beside her. As she lay and looked at it a new movement began in her heart, gentle as the stirring of the curtain beside the sunny window. After all these years of loveless love-affairs here was at last another human being to whom, without any effort at all, her life was unalterably linked.

"You're mine," whispered Sikey to the red crumpled object in humility and pride.

* * * * *

In September the three girls found themselves gathered together in Richard's cottage. There was a holiday feeling in the air, born of the fine weather and the light summer dresses that fluttered like butterflies about the house and garden, but there were hints that the fall of the year was not far off. The leaves were thinning, the grass shrinking, the air trafficking with a million flecks of down from ragwort and willow-herb. A row of young chestnut-trees at the end of the garden was yellowing from within, so that it looked as though the outer screen of leaves concealed a light. Within the cottage an atmosphere of happiness, fine and brief as the late gold spell of summer, flowed from one person to another, kindling a feeling of warmth at the core of their lives. Jane had come down for ten days' holiday, and was relieved to observe the change in the other two, for Valentine was a little less moody and considerably healthier, while Sikey, who had been ill and bad-tempered for the later months of her pregnancy, was now beginning to bloom and was surprised to find that the point of existence had moved from herself to her infant son.

"I'd never do it again," she declared. "As it's just for once I don't mind." But from the way in which she huddled the baby to her breast they knew that pleasure in life had come back to Sikey from a source she had least expected, and that she felt herself perfectly competent to deal with the future.

"You might almost think we chose our own destinies, you and I, they fit us so exactly," said Valentine as they sat together in the garden one morning. The mist-swathed daybreak was now shot through with sunlight, but autumnal vagueness was still in the air, blurring contour and horizon and giving to spire and tree a fictitious loftiness.

Sikey laid down her newspaper, ready for contemplative talk until the baby woke. "I'm not sure we don't choose them." Lazily she stretched out her leg, admiring the slim ankle. How satisfactory it was to have produced a baby single-handed, as it were, and to have her body to herself again, still unblemished.

"It so belongs to you," went on Valentine, "that your problems should be actual and concrete; where to have your baby, how to live now he's born, how to make money to provide for his education and future, just as my own difficulty is exactly like me—vague, psychological, a mental process working itself out in the void and relapsing back into emotion in the end. It's of a piece with the whole pattern. I shall go on making endless explanations to myself as to why I fell in love with Francis; why I didn't love him more, or less, or differently; for what reasons I shall be unhappy for the rest of my life."

"You won't," threw in Sikey. "Things change."

"Well, and don't you see that if things will be different later on, then that makes nonsense of them now?" She leant forward, brilliant and unbalanced under the stimulus of pain. "Now I'm unhappy—damnably so—it's like a pain in the side that shoots up whenever I move. But one day perhaps I shan't be unhappy and I shan't understand why. Even from here I can see that. It will be like a poison in the blood that's run its course. If I don't die of it, that is."

"Oh, don't think like that," murmured Sikey. "You must be patient."

It was difficult; she wanted to sympathize; but with this sweet drowse of maternity in her blood it was impossible to get back in spirit to the old hungers and furies that tormented Valentine. "Romantic love, how false it all is," she thought sleepily. "A legacy of lies from the troubadour and the trouvère."

"Well, it may be sweated out in time," admitted the other girl.

Poor Valentine; tense hands and restless feet; what a temptation to say, "Have a baby, my darling, and you'll feel quite differently." Then Sikey pulled herself up in reproach. This line of thought was tantamount to jeering: "Ha, ha, you silly creature, you got smashed up in a bus accident and I didn't." All she was pluming herself on was that she had had the luck not to fall in love with Francis.

"It's all luck, first and last," she said meditatively.

"Yes, it's a toss-up either way. Perhaps that's the worst thing of all—not to be able to give it a meaning. It would be easier if I were a believer and could call it sin: 'I did evil and God has forgotten me.' But life will be bearable again one day and I shall still be just as evil. Oh, Sikey, it's all senseless. I want to learn from life—I'm not unteachable—but all life shows one is happiness, misery, happiness, misery, in a meaningless succession like patches of sun and cloud. Presently I suppose one gets cowed into stupidity and accepts them both, without reason, like the beasts that perish."

Jane came across the lawn with a tray. "Milk for nursing mothers. And lemonade for you and me, Val."

Sikey looked at her in pleasure and relief as she stood there tranquilly under a tree in her flowery dress of patterned voile, with the soft sun on her hair.

"Jane, how sweet you are. I shall write a poem to you one day."

"Thank you," said Jane, handing her a glass. "What's your favorite meter?"

Sikey considered. "Limericks."

After the baby and the child Clare had been put to bed, the three went out for a walk in the pale evening. The woods were darkening on the edge of the common; low in the west the new moon, crimsoned, was caught by the last bars of sunset. As they sat on a stile for Sikey to rest, Valentine suddenly burst out with the admission of her renewal with Francis. She walked restlessly up and down the path before them; Sikey and Jane sat enlaced on the top bar with dangling feet. They expressed dismay, disapproval, and profound anxiety.

"Oh, I know it's a complete mistake, but I'm desperate," said Valentine. "I don't love him, and he doesn't love me, and yet something was left unfinished when I went away—it's got to go on."

She went on walking up and down in the still air. Bats were looping and squealing above the hedgerow. Her thoughts hovered round Francis as she had begun to know him in the last few weeks, caught like a rabbit in a trap by the wires of his own fixation. He was an overgrown schoolboy, a middle-aged adolescent, consumed by desire to do some forbidden thing. Married, he would deceive his wife for the sheer thrill of deception: then, having led his mistress to believe that she possessed him entirely, he would find the glamour of forbiddenness and the interest in infidelity transferred back to his legitimate partner: so he would rush from one to the other, his blood toxic with excitement at his own skill in intrigue.

"But what can you hope for?" asked Jane's soft little voice. "Nothing can go on that isn't a humiliation to you. Does he love his wife?"

She remembered their last conversation. "Are you in love with her?" she had asked, and he had become evasive. "I'm very fond of her." "But do you love her?" Finally and angrily he had burst out, "No."

"He needs her, I think. She's got money and she knows people who will help him. And," she added, not looking at Sikey, "she's going to have a child next spring."

"A la bonne heure!" cried Sikey, swinging her legs.

"I can't understand his attraction for you all," said Jane a little coldly.

"You forget his charm, my dear, his empty, empty charm," said Sikey.

Valentine stood before them, sibylline in the dimming light and the falling dew. "Charm? Charm? Is he real, does he exist at all? Francis Merryweather, my lovely lover—I invented him, I created him, he's a thing in my dream." The sibylline mood deepened in her like a darkness. An echo sounded in her mind: *"Blind in Hades also he shall converse with shadows, there as here."*

The other two slipped down from their perch, and stood for a moment savoring the sweet air. In the field beyond the stile the second crop of clover was dimly constellated in the twilight, like a tract of the Milky Way. The bats were still darting and wheeling about the hedge, with their high ghostly squeaks that hardly belonged to the world of sound. At last they turned and walked home across the common in silence.

* * * * *

"Do you feel wild on a wild morning?" asked Clare. "The cats do. Just look at them."

Out in the garden the wind was tearing down the leaves, and racing among the leafy deluge with blown fur, two black cats pursued each other with all the madness of the equinoctial gales.

"Do you like the cats?" she continued.

"Why, yes, I like them," said Valentine, rolling up stockings and nestling them in unfilled corners of her suitcase.

"I don't." Clare climbed into the window-seat and went on staring into the garden. "At least I don't mind Adam, but Eve's really too awful. She's just anybody's cat. I'd like a cat that would spit at everybody else; something that I knew was mine."

She looked round the little white room that had been Valentine's for the past three months. The books, the blotter, the colored bowls that had brightened the dressing-table, had all disappeared. The child's face clouded over.

"You're not really going? I don't want you to go. I liked you being here; the room's had a nice smell since you came."

Valentine put her arms round Richard's stormy daughter, and kissed the angry little face. "My sweet, I don't want to go either."

On the point of departure, she saw abruptly that the first small beginnings of recovery from her emotional disaster were budding in this cottage; affection had grown between her and the child, and though she reminded herself that children easily attach themselves to any one who lives in the same house and to whom they grow accustomed, the healing touch of Clare's fondness was like a fragrance to her tired spirit.

She went downstairs and found Richard in his workroom. He laid down his pen and bent a look of interest and enquiry upon her.

"I ordered your taxi for half-past two; that will give you plenty of time." He hesitated. "I don't know whether it's wise for me to tell you that I saw Francis Merryweather as I drove over from Blisloe. There was a herd of cows in the lane and we got held up for a few minutes on the hill road. He was leaning beside a gate reading a newspaper, and he looked up in a furtive way as we slowed down—no, perhaps furtive isn't the word—averted?—"

"Furtive *is* the word," said Valentine.

He gave her a keen glance. "Well, at all events, I knew him at once. But you know, that thin beaked face, it's the face of a hunter, a North American Indian perhaps; and that curious air of melancholy, it's the melancholy of primitive peoples . . ."

Fearing tears, Valentine forced herself to laugh. "Really, Richard, if you of all people begin to sentimentalize him! The last person I knew who met him said to Jane, 'That fellow Merryweather, he's a Yidd, isn't he?' "

She walked over to the window and pulled the curtains farther back, as though it were suddenly important to have more light in the room. Drops of rain were scudding down the glass; long rainy wires slanted before the wind; the trees and bushes streamed. Bowing her head against the pane, she listened while Richard spoke.

"You see, my dear, you've got caught in the old romantic trap, and by romanticism I mean the delusion that perfection is to be found on this earth, whether in love, or in differently arranged personal relations, or in a social readjustment. Don't you see, Valentine, that romanticism looks for a thing in a place where it can't be found?"

"Oh, these words," she thought, watching the rain on the disheveled garden. "I want to find a past happiness with Francis, and I can't. But why, because I can't, should I deceive myself that I'm looking for God or faith, or trying to save my soul?"

"Instead of possessing your experiences," went on Richard, "you're allowing them to possess you."

She turned round; her gaze wandered over the carved inkstand and the pipe-rack on his desk; a chess-board framed in wood was propped against the wall. If she half closed her eyes it looked like a square of plaited ribbons white and black.

"It's no good talking to me, Richard. It's like arguing with some one prostrated by influenza and saying they ought not to have caught it. I'm in it now and nobody can get me out."

A faint smile flickered over his worn face. "Not unless you want to be got out, it's true."

That night, back in London and in bed under the sloping roof of the attic room, she pondered the predicament again.

"What can be the meaning of this grief which never ends, except that I love Francis? Love—what's love? Love is spirit. Then why does my heart still throb as though it could shake me to pieces, when Francis looks at me with tenderness; why do I adore his blown hair and bright eyes, the shape of his head and the lovely modeling at the back of his neck? Why does the whole of life apart from him lose all its meaning, the moment he touches me? Well, then, love is flesh. But if that's true, why am I cut to the soul, far beyond all self-concern, to know him mean-spirited and a liar? Love, then, is a disease of the mind. Yes, but why is it linked up with tenderness and beauty, with all the loveliest things man's spirit knows? Oh, the thing's insoluble."

Her thought broke off as she noticed a rustling, fluttering sound on the wall above her bed. It moved with soft persistence from one corner of the room to another, and she lay listening in sudden reasonless terror. It came nearer; something brushed her face. Panic-stricken, she leapt out of bed and switched on the light. An immense moth, brown and furry, beat its wings round the white globe. She caught up an envelope from the table and tried to fan it towards the window; it beat about the air and settled on her nightgown. Palpitating with childish fear, she shook it off: it lay on the floor, its wings vibrating beside her bare feet.

She opened the door and wafted it out on to the landing; then in a fever she crammed the first objects that came to her hand—a handkerchief, a stocking, a bed-room slipper—in the space below the door, and sat down shivering on the bed. The action had brought back to her mind the night she had tried to kill herself, and since she knew that that way out was now closed, a terror of what she would still have to endure without hope of release came over her. She recalled that that afternoon when the train had stopped in the Tube between one station and another for two or three minutes, she had been seized with the same sweating panic, and she wondered whether a complete breakdown of body and nerves might not be the result of her renewal with Francis. That it could bring her no happiness she knew. The beauty which had seemed to her an integral part of their love in the past had been, she now perceived, extrinsic and adventitious: nothing remained but this lying sensational appeal to passion. Francis with his gayety, his vivid love of life, his ardent desire for her, had once been a symbol of harmony and natural happiness; but he was not himself the condition symbolized—indeed by now he had no relation to it; she recognized moreover that he had deteriorated even in the last half-year. Yet her senses continued to cry out after him as though he were still her only pathway to joy. She had enough insight to recognize that all she could hope for now was to be cured of her malady, and that the easiest cure would have been the knowledge that he was for ever inaccessible. But since their recent meetings in the Culver Hills she realized with mingled excitement and dismay that he was all too accessible, that he would always be accessible, and that her only chance of recovery lay in accepting a cruelly complete knowledge of him in face of which no last lingering vestige of love could live.

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Invested in his bright enthusiasm he sat on the Chesterfield, dispensing (she fancied) an almost calculable quantity of charm. He was describing a Rugger match he had seen that afternoon; it had exhilarated him, and his own account of it exhilarated him still more. It was obvious to her that he was inwardly preening himself for being twice as alive as any other person of his time.

"Oh, it was marvelous, I tell you, marvelous!" He leant back on the cushions and stretched out an arm, waiting for her. But still she stood aloofly by the mantelpiece, balancing a silver slipper on the point of her toe, dropping it and picking it up again.

"Come along." He patted the couch beside him. Ignoring the invitation, she lit a cigarette and carefully blew out the match, holding it still between her fingers and bending a concentrated look on its charred end.

"How's your wife?"

"Damn it, why do you ask?"

Again the silver slipper clattered into the hearth, and again, laboriously, she picked it up and swung it from the point of her toe. Sullenness came down on him like dark decending.

"Oh, Lord, she cries—whatever I do and whatever I say she cries—I never knew such a woman—she can keep it up for days at a time. Sometimes I think she'll never stop."

His face grew darker. Fascinated, Valentine gazed down into the mind he revealed so blandly. "Oh, go on," she wanted to urge. "This is what I need; this is escape, recovery, to know your meanness to its very root. That poor pregnant devil." But she said nothing; she held her breath and waited. Suddenly he broke out again.

"There are times when I'd like to leave it all and clear out to America—days when I'm within an inch of booking my passage."

His sullen mouth was full of evil will. She looked at it attentively. Was he aware how coldly now she watched, observing, cataloguing the habits of the creature? And yet that evil will was not directed against anybody in themselves, for themselves; it was just the will of an angry wild animal, snapping and snarling at the hands that were putting chains upon it. Poor Francis, how lost he was. He had lost the pride and integrity of wildness, but he was far, oh, quite comically far, from becoming a civilized man who submits to limitations because his deepest self is free. Poor little trapped beast, so bored, so angry; all the brightness going from its eyes and the sheen from its coat!

At the same moment she had, and had not, pity for him, knowing that the cycle of pain, the whole bitter round of consequence, had been hers alone to bear. For him there had been (as there was now in his marriage) no more than a mean-spirited irritation and an irresponsible desire to escape. She slipped her foot into the silver shoe and stood squarely regarding him, with a bad pride leaping in her heart. "You poor thing, you poor weak shoddy thing, perhaps it's better so. Perhaps the women you profess to love are fitter to suffer than you."

But the mood shifted as she bent her mind to understand. "No, it isn't that he's too weak to suffer, it's that he is incapable of suffering. Pain simply can't touch him, can't come to him at all. In all his life he will never know shame, or sorrow, or regret. He will live his life out and have learnt nothing. He can make no headway because he's incapable of internal conflict; he can only move from one fit of self-will to another. For me, damned as I am now, there's a chance, a tiny ghost of a chance, that I'll be a decent person again one day. But there's none for him. Nothing in heaven or earth can make him into a decent human being now."

Here in this quiet flat, with its inexpressive furnishings and bleak walls, the old passionate note was forced, the old antics performed. Would this house too receive the imprint of their desire and disillusion? "Whatever happens," she had promised him in the past, "I shall remember always that I once knew the loveliest thing in the world. I shall be grateful to you for ever, for giving me this." But the promise made by a past self was broken too. It wasn't lovely any more; nothing was left whole; it was all vulgarized, despoiled and violated.

"Of course," he was saying with his new, impudent look, "I'm much more cynical about women than I was. They all profess to be very adoring and so on, but all they want is to get their claws into you and keep them there."

She drew away from him and resumed her first position by the mantelpiece. "Tell me, Francis, what do you really want, what is it you're looking for?"

"Oh, Lord, *I* dunno." He yawned and stretched himself lazily. "I go about the world looking for a woman I can really feel at home with, but all I do is to entangle myself with a pack of bullies."

"Yes?" Ambushed, secret, she watched and listened aware now that his life had sunk so deep in sense that humanity was dying within him. Why, she wondered, had she rushed headlong on her fate, two years ago at Radnor End? Why had she not held back and set herself to learn what he was, before committing her happiness so irrevocably into his hands?

Tonight he had discovered a new sort of pleasure, a titillation, in outrageous frankness. The knowledge that she thought as badly of him as possible gave him a certain comfort and security, and he savored for once the freedom of expressing thoughts which as a rule he would not admit had ever entered his head.

"As a matter of fact, what simply maddens me is the idea of being tied down to one woman," he threw out at last. "I kick against it the whole time. Sometimes when I think that I was free such a little time ago, and now I've tied myself up in a relation which is worse than the whole lot put together, well, I curse myself, for the greatest goddamned fool that walks the earth."

She accepted it, garnered it; in time to come she would draw upon this night's conversation as a medicine for her grief.

* * * * *

When the cold weather set in Sikey came back to London. Winter that year was hard and early; the weeks were a chain of darkness. They almost forgot that the country ever existed as they shivered along the narrow little rat-run from home to office or to the shops in the Portobello Road and back again. The taps were cold; the kettle was cold; the milk bottle was corked up with ice and to bring it upstairs one had to face the damp cold and peeling walls of the staircase. Snow lay on the paths in the gardens of the square like a sprinkling of sugar on a dark cake; it crusted the tops of the vans that had come up from the country.

"A-men!" moaned the coalman in the freezing wind that blew down the streets from the north-east. "A-men!" The horse-hoofs gabbled; passing lorries shook the walls of the house. "A-men!" cried the coalmen again in despair. Women wrapped themselves in fur, wore wool next their skin and cased their legs in boots or gaiters, but their faces were still blue and raw with the sudden cold. The sun appeared briefly about midday, an acid drop in the sulky sky, and popped in again. Pipes froze and burst; all the lighter pleasures of life dissolved in unbelievable discomfort. From the surprise and pain and complaining to be heard on all hands, one might have supposed that this was the first winter London had ever been called upon to endure.

However, so long as there was a gas-fire in her room and enough hot water for the baby's bath, Sikey did not allow herself to be incommoded by the cold. It was as though she carried a perpetual fount of warmth within, and the freedom with which she lavished on the baby a maternal instinct which nobody had ever suspected her of possessing seemed to have renewed her life at its source and put an end to the old staleness and boredom.

"Well, my sweet, my precious, my little velvet thing," she was crooning as she dried the baby after its bath. Jane came into the room and interrupted the murmur of adoration.

"My frog," she added loudly, anticipating criticism. It was a good-humored baby; propped up on her knee, it gave a wide toothless grin and waved its hand. Between fat fist and fat arm the wrist was marked off by a line as thin as a hair.

"You're a little fat pig," said Jane severely as she closed the door behind her.

But the baby only cooed and blew bubbles at the corners of its mouth. How bright were those brown eyes, still with the three-cornered look of infancy; bright as curves of pearly shell were the tiny nails of his toes and fingers.

"Oh, my honeydew, you're very lovely," said Sikey, powdering the pink body with a large round puff like a snowball. Jane sat down on the end of the bed and watched them, chin propped on arms that lay along the wooden rail at its foot. Steam still rose from the tin bath in front of the fire; behind it Sikey's face showed flushed and tender as she bent over the child. An immense maternal shadow stooped flickeringly on the wall beside her. It occurred to the girl on the bed that in spite of their flushed charm the two by the fire composed a picture as austerely complete as any Madonna and Child by Duccio or Cimabue.

"Sikey," she said, "if you were asked, in some absent-minded moment, who was the father of your child, who would you say?"

"The Holy Ghost," answered Sikey, amused. But after a pause, "That's true, you know," she added more seriously. "I feel very strongly that he's my own baby, nobody else's. And that's why it's so perfect having him. It's not pretty when young children are sick or constantly misbehaving, but all the squalid bits of early life should be a private affair between the child and its mother. It's necessary and unfortunate, but it's only unpleasant when you get a clumsy father looking on, or pretending not to look on."

"Are you sure, Sikey, that this isn't because you're not married?" Jane suggested diffidently. She dropped on her knees and rubbed her cheek against the baby's dimpled feet. Certainly she herself would never have been happy to have had a child outside the supposed protection of society, but every time she saw Sikey's baby warm and sweetsmelling from his bath, she felt that her life was purposeless and unfulfilled.

"Quite sure." Sikey nodded her head vigorously. "You may think—and I won't dispute it—that my life's been disorderly and casual enough in the past. But I assure you, Jane," and she bent a look of pure fulfillment on the bundle at her breast, "that from this point on, I know my way."

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Karl Diedrich had found a pub which sold memorable sherry. It had a row of turn-up seats upholstered in red plush, apparently stolen from the neighboring cinema, which were fixed against the walls of the bar; at the far end, away from the counter with its glittering bottles and beer engine, were wooden railings and a flight of four steps which led down into an arena of tables laid with white cloths for dinner.

He sat in a corner with his back to the arena, watching the door; his third glass of sherry stood on a table stained with wet circles, and ringed round with a brass railing as though to keep drunken glasses safely upon its surface. A prostitute came in, fur-coated, a Pekinese under her arm. The fat proprietor was cutting sandwiches behind a sirloin of beef. She greeted him gayly and put down the dog, whose lead became entangled with the stool she had just sat on. In the face the shrew ousted the gay lady as she bent to unloose her pet. Karl, amused, sketched the shrew on the back of an envelope, put it in his pocket, glanced at the clock, and then regarded the door again. Would she come or wouldn't she? There was no knowing, nowadays. "I lose my time with her," he grumbled to himself, wishing he had removed some of the paint from his nails before coming out. But just as he finished the golden-brown drink the door burst open, a curtain was pushed aside, and Valentine came in. She sat down beside him on a red plush seat, pulled off a close-fitting little hat, shook out her hair, and demanded drink. Presently they were deep in talk. During her long absence in the country he had lost interest in her, but since her return they had met frequently, and he, startled to find himself rejected as a lover and confided in as a friend to a point he considered indiscreet, had abruptly fallen in love, not without cynicism since he was well aware that her chief charm lay in the fact that she was no longer accessible.

"I love you, I love you," he muttered angrily, scanning that strained expressive face which had begun to fascinate him. At once she looked sulky; the corners of the Cimabue mouth dropped. "If you say that word again I shall scream."

Yellow streaks flickered in his eyes. "Am I so ugly, then? Am I lame? Am I blind? Am I old—yes, old like that cretinical old man who infatuates you? Bah! how you can do it, to let him love you—a mean man, you have told me yourself; a man you are not able to spit upon. Is it a *nostalgie de la boue* that keeps you there?"

He sparkled with jealousy and anger; the eccentric eyebrows worked up and down.

"You've got it wrong, it's not like that at all," said Valentine. "It's a disease of the blood and only another disease of the blood will drive it out."

Karl's love seemed to her irrelevant, unnecessary and stupid, just as (she supposed) hers must appear to Francis. But all the same his interest soothed her vanity and brought hints of a past vividness to eyes and cheeks. She began to observe the people about her with more curiosity. The fat man behind the counter was savoring a gloomy story from one of his clients; after a while he took up the tale himself.

"Knew 'im? A course I knew 'im. Why, 'e was operated on on that very table what's along in the billiard-room now. But they couldn't save 'im. No one could 'a' saved 'im. 'Ad a lump in 'is side as big as your two fists."

A lugubrious joy settled upon the group round the sandwich counter. "Thought so much of her eldest boy," came from a sad slight man with shoulders like a milk-bottle. He wiped the froth from his lips with a wafer of a hand. "Loved him like a jool—he felt a'most like her husband. Knocked up in one of those motor-bike tests he was, out Sleet Hill way. She said nothing to nobody for a month, and then she walked out early one morning and drownded herself in Hampstead Pond."

An orgasmic sigh rose from his audience, and their faces disappeared behind tankard or glass. It was as though they drew nourishment from misfortunes not their own. The girl looked on in envy, wondering if the final test of sanity might not be the pleasure one took in hearing of another's ill. Pictures of a distended side, a white face on the green cloth; of gray water crinkled by the wind and a crazed woman walking at dawn over the moist grass, distressed her fancy. She turned to Karl.

"I'll tell you a thing which most people don't know—or else they've forgotten. It isn't interesting to suffer, it's boring, boring, boring. Nobody knows how boring it is who hasn't been through it. 'A disastrous love-affair, oh, so interesting, my dear, so curious, most romantic!' Well, it isn't. You bore even yourself. Do you remember how Dostoievsky told the young man who wanted to be a poet that he must go away and suffer. How Russian, how indiscreet. What I hope is that he came back two years later and bored Dostoievsky to death with his tears."

Karl looked impish. "Perhaps it is that you have not suffered enough?" He drained his glass and ordered more sherry. Beside them on a bracket was a maidenhair fern growing out of a gilt shoe. He blinked at it incredulously.

"Oh, well, it's all the same," said Valentine. She raised her glass, mocking and tormented. "To a reduction in the high cost of loving, anyway. *'I am paid for't now.'* How odd of Cleopatra. I should always, instinctively, say: *'I am paying for't now.'* So I am too."

She dropped into silence, remembering how that afternoon she had gone to one of the larger stores to find out whether they would buy the furniture which Humphrey, installed once more at Radnor End, was sending up to London as her portion of the wedding-presents they had shared, and which was all that now stood between her and destitution. The bearing of the sleek little man who stood among the glossy pianos had altered in a flash, as soon as he realized that she was not a potential buyer, and she had had a vivid moment of insight into sellers of goods all the world over, as the insulted and injured. At first she had tried, timidly, "Do you buy second-hand pianos?"

And he had immediately overwhelmed her with a foam of words and a groundswell of contempt.

"Well, well, we must know a bit about it. Grand or upright, overstrung or straight-strung, iron or wood, mahogany or rosewood or whatever it is, age, number, name of maker and so on."

The torrent reduced her to blankness; she hadn't seen it for more than a year and in face of this onslaught could remember nothing.

"Come now," sneered the little man. He looked as though he had been waxed all over. "You're the saleswoman now, you're trying to sell us something, it's not for us to ask questions. You've got to tell us all about it, make us an attractive offer." He rubbed his doll-like little hands together and peered at her ironically. "We've got to be tempted, you know."

And suddenly pride had defeated poverty; she had turned her back on the leering sneering little wax doll and had walked sharply out of the shop. Here in a Soho bar pride rose in her again, curved her lips in defiance as she pondered her worn gloves, her shabby clothes, the ladder in her stocking darned patently across the knee. Oh, yes, they had "done" her, Humphrey and Francis; she was defenseless and resourceless except for that one last demon: pride of Lucifer, pride of the cobbler's dog, pride of the insulted and injured.

"I ask myself sometimes," Karl was saying, "why was I born in this fool of an age, why not in the Rinascimento? Those were good days for the artist." He stared before him; the powerful hands clasped and unclasped again.

"Art the handmaid of religion," murmured the young woman, waking up. "Would you have liked that?"

His eyebrows flew signals of disdain. "She was never that. In those days, don't you see, religion paid the bills just as the men of business do now. You remember the 'Annunciation' of Simone Martini in the Uffizi? The Virgin, she is like so many of those first painters, she is angry, she sulk, she does not like that it happen so. Is that religion, huh? I tell you it is the painters who understand life, not the priests."

They rose to go. He tucked her arm under his own and they went out into the night of lamps and stars, and a skyline crenellated with chimney-pots. Up the middle of the road two boys were pushing a hand-cart of empty tins and milk-smeared bottles in wire racks. Streets away, a fire-engine clanged and panicked into the distance. For a moment they stood in the block of light outside the public-house.

"Would you mind helping me to get divorced?" said Valentine casually.

"An—arrangement? You would not have me for your lover again?"

She shook her head. "An arrangement. We could stay somewhere, take a seaside bungalow for a week and call ourselves Smith. Your name need never come in. We could make it look black in the eyes of the char-woman and the postman; it's perfectly simple. You're a better friend than a lover, Karl; well, can I use your friendship and not your love? Humphrey wants to divorce me and you're a pawn in the game. Will you help me, Karl?"

He made an exaggerated bow; the yellow flecks lit up his eyes once more. "Madam, I am at your service."

* * * * *

The poor pay so heavily for their poverty, thought Jane as she came home past the lamps of a winter dusk. They pay with awkwardness, shame and discomfort for their gracious impulses. Outside the Tube station there was a stack of the earliest flowers—tulips the hue of lemons or of soap-bubbles, jonquils, feathery mimosa, tiny fragrant bunches of violets or lilies of the valley ringed with wire. A shabby couple carrying an infant and a bulging waterproof bag that shone as though with rain, had stopped to admire. "Look, Georgie, at them yellow choolips!" Recklessly the man plunged, bought half a dozen wrapped in a paper sheaf, read in his wife's expression the translation of their price into eggs and butter, and his inspiration foundered in a sea of shame and guilt.

And so, she continued, slipping her key into the Yale lock under the pillared porch, and toiling up the stairs, this money, these crackling paper notes and chinking coins of silver, detestable and contemptible as they are, wrap us like cocoons, soften the jolts of life, spin complicated webs between the generations, loose one and bind another to slavery. She pondered its influence on the two she lived with: Sikey was winning through by the power of money more than anything else, Valentine was losing ground daily because she had once allowed herself to become dependent, had now no economic basis apart from her husband, and since this disastrous love-affair had lost all sense of self-preservation.

After she had changed for dinner, and put into water the bunch of snowdrops which she had bought at Notting Hill Gate, their leaves like spears and the pure petals nicked with green, she settled down by the sitting-room fire with some sewing. Sikey came in.

"How's Baby?"

"Asleep. I've just fed him. Here, have you seen this?"

She held out an evening newspaper and Jane glanced at the column she indicated. It was a popular article concerning a show of modern furniture made in the Culver Workshops and now to be seen at a gallery in Chelsea. Francis Merryweather was acclaimed as a brilliant furniture-designer; the names of Adam, of Heppelwhite and Chippendale, the drawings of Matthew Lock, the work of Oeben and Riesener, were mentioned and even diminished by connection with his own.

"So you see we took a genius to our beds," mocked Sikey. "But for God's sake don't let Valentine see it.

What are we to do with her, Jane? When he rings her up she sulks, and when he writes she cries, and when she hasn't heard from him for a week she threatens suicide. One can't live like that, you know." She stood up; her slight fingers, delicately formed as the snowdrops themselves, caressed the flowers in the vase beside her. "I wish to heaven he'd stick to one woman or another. But according to her, the only thing he can get a kick out of is this rôle of the Gyratory Husband. Why can't she see him as ridiculous? Which he is."

Jane looked up, meditative, from her sewing. It occurred to her that Sikey's beauty was not maternal, a thing of curves and softness, but straight and shining like a blade.

"You're getting rather hard, Sikey. Why do you hate men so much? They're not monsters, they're just poor fools of humans like ourselves."

"Certainly." Sikey tossed her black curls like a wild pony. "Men are supportable as friends, publishers, engineers, coal-miners and so forth. They may be even admirable. But my whole point is that nowadays, as husbands and lovers, they're preposterous and absurd. It isn't a dislike of men that makes me say so. As a matter of fact, Jane, it's a reverence for the true male principle that obliges me to tear my hair and wring my hands when I see the modern travesty of it."

She had suddenly gone serious. From a jar on the mantelpiece she picked up a paper spill, thrust it into the gas-fire and watched it burn.

"The fact is," she threw out at last moodily, "women have lost all their respect for men. And that is what's destroying our world."

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For weeks the weather had labored between violent extremes. February echoed the snows and prolonged frosts of November.

"They say it's gone down about six or seven feet," grumbled Mrs. Palfrey, who was compelled to bring up water pail by pail from the basement, every tap in the house being frozen. "It's killed all sorts of things."

"Things we want or things we don't want?" asked Valentine vaguely.

It had bleached the countryside, wrung all the color from the grass. The drained fields looked like tarnished silver in the sun. Gales arose and disheveled the landscape, leaving it wispy, and dry as a bone. But at last after the long frost and the long drought came the rain, and after the rain the dwarf army of dog's mercury swept over the floor of the woods. Celandine shone below the hedge; leaves of kingcup; wild strawberry and herb Robert raced up like a tide. One morning of early spring the girl suddenly resolved to go down to Blisloe and walk across the hills to the bungalow, where Francis Merryweather was staying alone for a week or two after the strain (he announced) of his wife's recent confinement. Although they had met and even stayed together in London, it was the first time Valentine had gone to visit him in their old haunts, and it was with a twinge of anxiety as to how the familiar landscape would affect her that she left behind the depressing bungalows and army huts that straggled beside the Blisloe road, and struck out for the hills. The outskirts of Blisloe were melancholy under the spring sun: new pink houses stood baldly out of the mud; asphalt roads branched off to right and left, and ebbed away into waste land; decaying stalks of Brussels sprouts whiskered forlornly about the allotments. Valentine crossed a bridge over the canal that ran through the Blisloe plain; broken fragments of ice lay like water-lilies upon its surface. How clear and fine a day it was; not the eyes only but every sense was dazzled with the new light of the spring.

Soon she was following the hill road; she recognized the old sign-post at the top of the escarpment, where a lane, milky with chalk, ran down the slope to Radnor End on the other side of the hill. There, down beyond the woods that creaked and strained in the wind, Humphrey was living in the house they once had shared, admiring the daffodils that bowed under the apple-trees on the lawn; Robert Blair would still be forgetting his sermons and his parishioners as he pored over a fragment of Roman pottery; Mrs. Namble in her cottage by the watercress stream would be sewing at the window as she brooded on dead Susan under the yews. As she walked, the girl looked down on the vale as though it still cradled her past life; a turn of the road, and she might walk back into days whose fret she had now forgotten, absorbed in a profounder grief. Now they seemed to her innocent and even charming, in their freedom from tragic emotion.

She paused at the crossroads, trying to recollect some scene which had taken place here with Francis, but her memories were dull with use, she had fingered them a thousand times, lived them through and through again until she could evoke nothing even from the beloved country; its image had figured so vividly in her dreams of the last twelve months that it had sucked reality from the real; this common earth, these configurations of down and meadow, vale and wood, seemed a ghost, an echo of her thought of them.

And yet, though she could still go to meet Francis

Merryweather as her lover, though she was no longer self-banished from his arms and from the countryside that haunted her, it was no remedy: grief had outlived its cause. And, inexplicably, the most binding thread that enmeshed her was a knowledge of the false element in that grief, the invalidating sense that it was concerned with an ignoble object.

"Yes, why? why?" she demanded as the long miles fell behind her and she passed into a country of shallow beechwoods whose boughs seemed to be snowed with silver buds in the sunlight. "He's sly, mean, poor in everything that makes a man—I've no respect for him at all. Well then, why is it that *'my five wits nor my five senses can Dissuade one foolish heart'* . . . ?" But the woods and the white turf gave back no answer, and presently she was walking past Coulter's Farm and down the lane between the hazels, emptied of all thought.

"Well, hussy," cried Francis Merryweather, who was laying a twig fire between three bricks under the hedge that fringed the cornfield, "and what are you doing in these parts?" He looked up, handsome in a gray sweater; a tassel of dark hair flew from his forehead as he moved.

"What d'you suppose I'm doing?" said she, resentful at once. "You asked me to come, didn't you?"

"I suppose I did."

He set a match to the paper, and the twigs began to flare; a stream of blue smoke drifted towards the hedge.

"We shall have to look out, else we'll have the whole wood afire—it's as dry as a crust in the oven."

Picking up a rake, he combed back the ashen grass from the charred circle round the bricks. Valentine strayed through the gap in the hedge beside the maple, its bare mesh lacy against the blue sky. Below the cottage the sun burnished the shrunken bramble-copses, where a blackbird was shuffling about, raking over the leaves and polishing its yellow bill on a hazel twig. The clearing looked like a mop of blonde hair slightly faded. From a field below there came the trumpeting of a cow. It all seemed "safe" enough, a tranquil rural scene: what danger could there be? But in spite of the wide blue day, the smell of spring in the air, in spite of Francis who came and drew her hotly into his arms, at her heart there was a cold needle of fear.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it," cried the blackbird in the hedge. "Stop. Stop. Stop. Tew-tewey, tew-tewey, tew-tewey." Joyous and clear, his fluting rang through the wood. "Give it a rest, give it a rest." He polished his bill on a twig and shuffled among the dead leaves.

Inside the cottage two angry human beings faced each other. "It's no good," said Francis sullenly. "I can't go on. Let us be friends—friends as much as you like. But we can't be lovers again." He sat at the table, turning over the leaves of a notebook, twisting his black forelock into a knot and stroking the grain.

"But why?" cried Valentine. The transient bloom of yesterday's love-making was still upon her. "What has changed?"

For a time he would not speak. But at last, "It's my wife," he burst out. "She's gone off to the South of France with the kid to try and get fit again—she had a damn bad time. Well, I can't go on letting her down. Now that she's gone, I know how strong my feeling for her is. I've never cared for anybody like this."

Unbelievingly she surveyed him. "That's only your romanticizing trick, Francis, now that she's away from you. You're not in love with her, or me, or any one except yourself and your own sensations, your 'exquisite sensations' that you used to tell me about."

"Say what you like," he muttered. "I can't go on. I want to be faithful to her."

"Oh, don't insult me by talking of your faithfulness," cried Valentine in a passion. "Why did you ever let the thing begin again, if you wanted to be faithful? You didn't care a bent farthing about fidelity last summer, and you won't care this summer either."

"I care now," he snapped.

There was silence in the little room. A brand fell out of the long black stove and slowly whitened to ash below the grate. Valentine scanned the place inimically. Beside the painted dresser, a knot of wood looked like a grimacing gargoyle. A mirror, filmed with dust, hung from a hook in the wall beside their old dart-board; two soiled collars and a towel drooped from the clothes-line above the stove. Nothing had changed; so far the present Mrs. Merryweather had left little imprint here. Yet here in this very house, these very woods that had once been their own, he had blithely repeated the same idyllic note—with one woman? two? three? There was no knowing. She imagined his once-living observations become fixed and stagey, his charm turned on like a tap: "D'ye see this fir-cone? It's the squirrels strip them off like that; isn't it marvelous?" And over the red-pronged hazel buds in spring two heads would bend, enthralled, sacramental.

Still, she had finally learnt to accept him as unstable and faithless, and had felt sure at least of that infidelity and her consequent hold on some vagrant streak in him, but this belated romanticism over a deceived and absent spouse she had not foreseen. What a fantastic will-o'-the-wisp he was. In the past she had sat night after night alone in this room, jealously brooding: "Where is he now? Who's with him? Who is he making love to?" Another woman had succeeded her in the position of befooled housemate while she had played the temptress; but now the legitimate wife, child-encumbered, was calling the vagrant home. Well, well, well. Talented Francis Merryweather, handsome, nearing fifty, manufacturing his urgent desires in a terror of nursing unacted ones; let him go.

But presently they had rushed into recrimination about the past, while the blackbird whistled outside and the metallic sawing note of the bluetit puffed in from a copse near by.

"You've nothing to complain about. You left me. So long as you enjoyed yourself you didn't care what happened."

They barely listened to each other. He was slitting folded sheets with a paper-knife; an angry, tearing sound kept ripping through his words: she moved restlessly about the room, touching an object and then withdrawing her fingers as though it had burnt her.

"You resented my youth. I was young and very foolish. I couldn't believe the loveliness of love was all illusion. You wanted me to be old like yourself and treat it cynically as you did."

"Of course what I can never forgive you for," he began sourly, and it caught at her attention; she expected him to speak of the drawings she had destroyed, "what I never really got over, was the shock of the way you treated your husband. Waiting till he'd left England and then sneaking off to me as soon as his back was turned—"

"But, Francis," she burst in, astounded, "you've simply made this up. You mix up lies and truth until you don't know which is which. You know perfectly well that you asked me to come and live with you because he was trying to make me shut up the house at Radnor End and to break things off between us."

"I know nothing about that." He ripped up a sheet more sulkily than ever. "All I know is the impression it made on me."

She looked at him in amazement. By now he had lost all meaning; he just went off like a mechanical toy, wound up to anger, fear, or lust. It was no use: the whole thing was hopeless, not in the past tragic way that had almost had a beauty of its own, but in a new way of ugliness and lies and emotional squalor. At this moment she blankly hated him.

"All right. I'll go."

He got up. "Won't you have something before you go? Beer? A glass of milk?"

"No, nothing." She looked at him contemptuously. For a time at least suffering was over; tears were over; if this were their final break let it come and welcome; her heart was filled with a merciful gust of hatred that would carry her through. They stood for a moment hesitating in the doorway. Two wood-pigeons had just settled in the maple-boughs and begun their long complaint: *"My toe bleeds, Betty. My* toe *bleeds, Betty."* Against the bright day they looked stiff, absurd, like birds of wood. At the edge of the clearing the stockade of beech-trees shone, their wild hair orange, their bodies the color of—what? Elephants? Opals? Sea-water? Tarnished silver? An old stone palace in the south? The girl surveyed them as a dying man might on his last morning on earth.

"Good-by," she said at last, coldly, to the dark man at her side.

"You looked so lovely just then, when you were in a fury," he babbled suddenly. His eyes began to gleam and he moved towards her.

"Oh, I hope you burn in hell!" she cried as she ran down the steps.

But after a five-mile walk along the Blisloe road, the one plain fact of their final parting overcame her. Under this fury of hate and contempt the old blood-obsession was there unbroken. While he was still her lover she could keep it in some sort of control—it was a mere sensual fever that hadn't yet run its course—but if she were never to see him again it would spread through her once more like a fatal poison, and the memory of her own past passion for him would be renewed in its power of devastation.

"I can do no more," she stormed at Jane that night. "I shall just lie back and give myself up now, and life or God or whatever there is can damn well prop me. If it won't I can only go down. It's not possible to make a single effort more. I'm done."

"Best thing that could have happened," thought Jane darkly to herself. But she was too wise to say so.

* * * * *

No change of season can be discerned under the vast dome of the British Museum reading-room. In its sodden, greenhouse-like warmth there bud only the strange growths of the mind, peaked and whitish in color, one fancies, like plants deprived of air, and allowed only just so much light as filters through the high arched windows, whose pale moonstone radiance suggests a perpetual twilight outside. Yet here life simmers in continuous movement when compared with the deathlike stillness of the North Library, where even the closing of a book or the scratching of a pen resounds to heaven.

Sitting at his section of shiny black table, facing the tooled leather book-rests, the red pen cradled by two curved hooks, and a Babel-tower of books which the pale assistant had just placed before him, Richard thought that he had never in his life felt less inclined for work. But at least the reading-room with its fillet of great names and its tepid air held off from him the dazzling spring outside whose light hurt the eye, teased the blood, promised impossible enchantments with which he had no more concern. He read over the last sentence he had written, picked up his pen, and dropped it again. The old gentleman on his left was hard at work, blowing through his teeth as he jotted down fragments in a notebook: at his right hand an elderly woman in the blouse of a Russian peasant hung over a friend's chair and began a whispered conversation. Both had gentle voices, careful voices, both conscientiously weighed every word they said.

"And did you go to Tarascon? Was it interesting?"

"Oh, yes, it was *very* interesting," whispered back the seated woman. "There's a church there simply full of interest; some most interesting statues there." She swung round on her chair and her long beads chinked.

"And where are you going next?" breathed her friend.

"Well, I rather thought of going to Corsica, but now all the museums are open perhaps it would be more interesting to go to Rome." Again came the chink of beads.

"Dear me, Millie, you're very fortunate," said the Russian blouse, so distinctly that the old gentleman on Richard's other side drew himself out of his books to look threateningly in their direction and murmur, "Ts, ts, ts," before he sank back again.

The afternoon wore fruitlessly on. "It's the spring," thought Richard. "One can't work on a day like this." He pushed aside his books and walked out through the swing doors, past the umbrellas, the yellow telephone-box, the policeman in the hall; past the mosaics and the Roman emperors looking like efficient business men from Manchester or Leeds, round the corner into ancient Egypt with the more than mortal brow, and the timeless mouth. Tucked away in the corner, faced by the two vast waxen-looking heads of Rameses II, was the mean little refreshment room. Jane was sitting at a table drinking tea out of a thick white cup.

"Hello, Richard. I didn't see you in the reading-room. I had to come in and look up something. It's a horrid day for working, isn't it?"

She moved her bag from a chair and he sat down beside her. It alarmed her to see his transparent skin and sunk eyes. He was certainly, she reflected, one of the sensitive people who, moved by the unseen cause of the unknown event, wear the look of an experience just before it is about to happen to them. Hastily she began to talk of indifferent matters, as a veil drawn over her fear for him, but he brushed it aside.

"There are times, Jane, when I lose all hold on things—when everything I've done, even this book of mine, seems pointless and perhaps misleading. Is it really because I haven't long to live that I'm driven to justify an attitude of faith? Am I just a sick animal, with mind enough to devise a compensation, as they say? When I was strong and well there was no need to find a belief to live by: common life day by day sustained one, without dragging in ultimate issues."

Jane glanced round her. The faces and bodies collected at the white tables did not suggest, she had to admit, that they housed a soul. But it might very well be that they were no index to their immortal freight. A young man with pimples on his neck hurried in and took from the varnished deal hat-rack a bowler lined with rich red pleats of satin.

"My het—thenk goodness nobody's pinched it."

Opposite them a young Indian had just sat down. The waitress was taking orders.

"What for you, sir?"

The young man eyed her nervously. "Tea-pot."

She slapped down a plate of biscuits before Richard and tucked the tray under her arm.

"Anything to eat?" How poised and careless she was even in her haste; over the nervous Indian she hovered for a moment like a hawk.

"Tea-pot," he snapped.

"I said did you want anything to eat, sir? Toast? Cake?"

"Tea-pot," cried the young man, quivering like a wire. The hawk sniffed and darted away.

Richard caught the girl's look of amusement and it seemed to him that he was old and tedious and that she wished to avoid answering his appeal. But presently she turned to him, struggling for words.

"Don't you think it's a little morbid, this fear of being imposed upon? It's destructive—it leaves one nothing. Honestly, Richard, don't you feel that all you do has, or may have, an importance which can't be seen at the moment? All our actions reach down into life or death, good or evil—I don't know. Aren't we perhaps working on the wrong side of the design, like the weavers of Gobelin tapestry?"

It seemed the word he wanted, and he went back to the reading-room with a refreshed mind, in spite of the anxious little smile she gave him as they parted in the hall. Dear Jane, sweet Jane: she had (he thought) that rare gift of contemplative female wisdom and sympathy which has almost died out of the modern world. About her he could feel an ancient idealism:

She is the clernesse and the verray light
That in this derke worlde me wynt and ledeth.

He wondered if Sikey and Valentine realized the rareness of her quality. But the interchange between the three of them was so close that Jane herself had perhaps taken as much as she gave; that odd little air of deep experience in spite of her virginity was drawn, it might be, from those two emotional young women whose lives she shared. He unfolded Sikey's last letter—one of the half-frivolous, wholly skeptical outbursts which now and then she hurled at him. The hands of his watch pointed to five; a wasted day; he might as well go home. He turned to the second page.

You know the old story of the endless winding queue that appeared on the Day of Judgment before the Almighty, and how cheers rose up along all its mighty length as the word was passed down the ranks from those interrogated in front of the Throne, that the Act of Kind was not a Crime? There seems to me a singular beauty and pathos in that story. But beyond that it has such a forlorn cosmic significance. Man set down here to play an appallingly difficult game of which he doesn't know the purpose and can only guess the rules, his mind tossed about by the thousands of gods and prophets who arise and say that that purpose, those rules, have been *revealed to them alone. Poor Man. He suffers: he has no choice in his creation: he pays a bill he never ran up. All this talk of man trying to justify himself at the Judgment. What I hope to see is God justifying Himself.*

The written words danced before his eyes; the lines shot away to infinity like railway tracks; a dazzle of black spots moved before his face; the room swayed round him. He closed his eyes in an attempt to steady himself, and when he opened them it was to see that the letter had fallen from his fingers to the floor. On picking it up he felt an unaccustomed weakness in his right arm, and it was an effort to pack his papers together. Could he catch the five-forty? He glanced at his watch. A quarter of an hour had slipped away into the limbo of lost time. He stared at the wire cage of the electric light cable that ran along the top of the partition, and tried to collect his thoughts. What had happened? His blind animal self had no doubt, and a trembling realization rose from those sightless depths into his conscious mind. After all, it was what he had been told to expect, what he was amply prepared for. Perhaps five minutes of unconsciousness as he sat upright in his chair: it was the first reverberation, of which a second would summon him into dissolution. Well, he must make haste. There were things still to be done, and time might well be short.

* * * * *

"Were policemen ever babies?" asked Clare as they walked through the May morning towards the village of Dewberry Common. The roadside banks were a foam of white cow-parsley, almost Japanese in its delicacy under the elms; the trees were still clotted with leafage—the ash flaring into cockades, the oak's crisped buds unfolding—that had not yet coördinated into solid masses. In the hot sunlight the copses and meadows looked bright, not with the sheen of the vegetable world, but that of silk or glass.

"Policemen? Babies? Of course they were," said Valentine, swinging the straw bag in which they were going to carry home the groceries.

Clare was silent for a while. "How I should love to see a baby policeman," she said wistfully at last.

"Oh, yes," breathed Valentine, seeing what she saw; a tiny pompous blue figure, lying in its cot under a minuscule helmet; and they walked along content. It was a charming morning: the mounded hedges that had not been clipped back were white with may like a freshly laundered tablecloth. This brief visit to the country was a reviving dew to the girl's being. In the weeks that had passed since Francis left England it was as though her whole life had crept underground. Her grief over him caused her to feel unsightly; she felt plague-scarred, and expected people to shrink from her. An unconscious metaphysic made her behave as though to be paralyzed with misery was to have committed an unforgivable crime against society; she felt weighed down with guilt and evil, and could no longer look the world in the face. But it was no obsession of conventional guilt that possessed her: for wavering Humphrey she felt only a scorn that had fittingly expressed itself in tossing him the evidences of her supposed liaison with Karl, who had since left England; for the unknown Mrs. Merryweather an ironic sympathy as she wondered exactly when and how she would discover that her husband's most intimate pleasure lay in the excitement of having some one to deceive. It was the disharmony of her own nature that had reduced her to this confused and guilty state;

that she, by blood the life-lover, the life-intoxicated, should be obliged to detest her own existence was as if a young tree should be bound down and made to grow towards its own roots.

But now, dazzled with sun, she walked gayly into the village shop with Clare. It was spring, full spring; cuckoo, cuckoo, rang in the woods with sweet monotony; roadside rivulets chinked along the stones. Why go over and over *the map of days outworn, Whose beauty lived and died as flowers do now?* May was here and life would surely bud again.

Inside the little shop which smelt of cheese but sold everything that could travel in a tin or be measured into a paper bag, two old women were chatting together while old Mrs. Boyster behind the counter stood slicing the bacon. They recalled the bad weather which other Whitsuntides that fell in May had brought with them.

"And that snowed and that blowed, and when we come out of church, that were knee deep."

Clare drummed on the counter and sang a little song to herself, ignoring everybody. Mrs. Boyster wrapped up the rashers of bacon and tried to catch her eye, but the child, walled in with pride and shyness, refused to notice. However, when the blue bag of sugar, the rattling packet of tea, the salad oil in its tall graceful bottle, and all the other purchases had been stowed away, the old woman fixed her with a prophetic eye.

"And have you got your best clothes ready for Whitsun, little lady?"

"I don't wear *best* clothes, I just wear clothes," said Clare, pink and haughty because she suspected the old woman of a trap to make her feel ridiculous.

"Then you must get some new ones quick," twinkled

Mrs. Boyster. "Be sure you wear new clothes on Whitsun, else the birds'll make a mistake on you."

She watched them out of the shop, rocking with laughter as she saw Clare's puzzled frown.

"Now mind what I say, little lady, or sure as I stand here the birds'll make a mistake on you. Just you see!" she shrilled down the road after them. Valentine waved and they walked on. A small tempest of husk and flower rained upon them from the beech-trees above. Within the wood that encroached on the common there was a haze of bluebells like an August sea. Presently, soothed by the silence, Clare spoke.

"Why have people like that always to behave in such a silly way to people like me? It makes me so angry. And besides, she's a very common old woman."

"Clare, you're not to be a snob," said Valentine firmly, but the child mocked her with an unbelieving look.

"That's what Jane called me last week. But why should you pretend she's the same as us? You know she isn't. That's just what Daddy does. Only I did think better of you and Jane."

They found Richard lying in a long chair on the lawn. He dismissed his daughter and began to talk of her to Valentine with a slight anxiety.

"The daughter of the parish priest—Amy Chinnor—has been giving her elementary lessons this spring. Of course they mean nothing to her; she's got a quick ear and she patters them off like a parrot. Yesterday she went about the house murmuring to herself, 'and all the sinful lusts of the skin.' And Pontius Pirate, as she calls him, is now a familiar with whom she sails the high seas down beyond the currant bushes."

He screwed up his eyes as though at the same time he was trying to see and not to see. "But she's getting the wrong ideas, you know; I don't like that Chinnor woman. She's a spinster and a snob. I wish you and Jane would take her on if—when—" he hesitated. "Would you?"

"I like Clare," said Valentine, uncertain what he wished.

He put it aside. "I'll talk it over with Jane."

For a while they did not speak. In the wood across the common a cuckoo still bawled its two incessant notes, and down in the village a church bell was tolling. He wondered how soon its striking-day for him would come, and whether he was savoring his last Maytime; and thought that he had lived so long with death that if some power could prolong for him the mysterious and questionable gift of life he would not dare to be glad. Images of his first love, of his wife, of that odd little girl three years ago in the South of France, just before he came home, perplexed him with their fugitive allure. Near to death, he saw that like the carrot at the end of the donkey's nose had been his lifelong desire of happiness with a beloved woman, a desire which, never so much as half fulfilled, had lured him on and made him blind to every other distraction, until the end of the journey came within sight and reduced even that most urgent of all issues into unimportance.

* * * * *

They waited for a bus, towards the gritty tattered end of an August day in London. Oxford Street seethed with small ugly people like an anthill. Advertisements glared from every hoarding. The traffic roared and shook the houses. Fumed and impure was the air they breathed, walled in by miles of plate glass whose glitter intensified the heat.

"Shall we walk?" said Jane as they fell back from an onslaught upon a crowded red bus.

"No, let's have one more try," suggested Valentine. They were working together in Gower Street now. Valentine had begun to develop (much to her friend's surprise) the mechanized efficiency of a sexless worker and had set her jaw grimly to endure a life she loathed in every nerve. But the spiteful comments she threw out were hardly those of a "settled" person.

"You think the patient's coming back to sanity, don't you?" she had demanded of Jane. "As though this kind of slavery weren't the greatest insanity of all. To hawk round one's precious hours and sell them for almost nothing, and to be grateful for the chance of selling them—bah, I know madness when I see it."

At last they boarded a westward-bound bus, after a severe struggle in which they were pushed ruthlessly aside by another desperate fighter. He glowered down at them from the second step of the staircase, a bag of tools in his hand.

"I don't say beg yer pardon, I say damn yer eyes!"

But their laughter disconcerted him and he disappeared. The bus jolted them homewards; at last they were walking through the dusty square, under the portico and up the stairs.

"This heat is like a blanket," said Jane. "I'll turn on a cold bath." She ran off, and Valentine picked up the letters that lay on the table. Francis's writing, and a London postmark. With shaking fingers she tore it open. He was back in Chelsea; wanted her to write to him; wanted to see her. In amazement she turned the page.

"Write to me again and I will answer *in any way you wish,* provided it is not bruited from the house-tops. . . . For perhaps after all I should hate you to be cured."

Well, there was no doubt that she had gone a very short distance along the road to recovery—that dreary road, arid as Oxford Street in summer. The old agitations and desires began to wave like tendrils in her heart. If he wanted her then she would certainly be sucked into the whirlpool once more. For a moment she was resentful of his callousness.

"Now that I've got free a little, now that there's a distance between him and me, between me and my pain over him, he destroys me by wanting me again and I'm too weak to stand out. Oh, what a hell it is. *Hell and Dionysus are the same,* as Richard reminded me the other day. Who would have guessed a tale like this from its beginning, years ago on Heron Hill?"

Upstairs Sikey in an overall was painting her room. Valentine stood at the door and watched her graceful wrist as she worked the brush up and down on the window-sill, and nuzzled it into corners with a professional ease. It was airless as a warm oven in the room under the roof; Sikey worked idly, but the baby on the floor crawled from place to place with the rapidity of a small insect.

"Keep my son out of the paint-pot, will you? Oh, the little beast, do stop him."

In the next room Jane hummed and splashed in her bath. A barrel-organ tinkled in the streets below.

"Sikey, I've heard from Francis. He wants—or at least he's willing—to be my lover again."

The wrist paused in its stroke. "Surely you wouldn't have him?"

"If I see him then it's inevitable; I've no choice."

Sikey turned and faced her, brilliant with scorn. "Look here, Valentine, we shall soon be thirty, and after thirty one can't behave like a romantic schoolgirl. Damn it, use your wits and keep away from that poor wisp Merryweather."

"What's all this about?" Jane appeared naked from her bath, a slight little figure with thin legs and the breasts of a child. A towel drooped from one hand.

Sikey told her.

"Oh, Lord, don't be a fool, Val," sighed Jane. "You've got a job—there's a chance for you to pull through—don't drop back into that old muddle."

"Are you really quite disinterested, both of you?" threw out the censured one in sudden antagonism.

The baby, exhilarated by the snapping of people's tempers like small thunderstorms all round him, rolled on the floor, shouted with joy, and clutched at the paint-pot. Down it went; a flow of scarlet paint lapped over its side like a tongue. The three young women darted into activity round the small male tyrant on the floor.

"I think," said Sikey to her son when the tumult had subsided, "that you begin to bore me." She leant back and surveyed him thoughtfully. "I think I shall have to provide you with a father who will provide you with a nurse."

"Oh, is that your plan?" said Jane with interest, drying herself in the middle of the room, while Valentine picked up the child and took him into the bathroom to be washed.

Sikey gave the impish grin that mocked her own beauty. "I'm bored, Jane, bored. The feminine smell of this flat bores me. I want a pipe on the mantelpiece and a whisky bottle in the cupboard."

"Then you'll get it," said Jane sagely as she balanced on one leg like a heron and dried her toes. "I've always thought that you were one of the people who have only to formulate a wish and it comes true."

In the bathroom, Valentine was wiping the baby's fingers with a rag soaked in turpentine.

"Gurr-h," he cried, and clutched at her hair. She looked at his dark eyes, trying to trace a resemblance to Francis Merryweather, but it was Sikey's own mocking look that answered her; the dissociation was as complete in her mind as in Sikey's. "I suppose you *are* his son?" she asked the unconscious baby ruefully. He sneezed at the pungent smell of the turpentine and tugged at her hair again. "It's just as well he isn't mine," she thought, her mind still running on Francis. "As soon as he began to romance, as children do, I'd be in terror that it was the crookedness of his father coming out in him—I'd probably drive him into lying by anticipating it."

She dried the little hands and put the child down. "No, my pet, you're rather nice, but I'm glad I'm not your mother."

In her own room, with its western aspect, the heat lay heavier still, as though the sky were a sheet of lead over a furnace. Beyond the window a church spire showed white as a candle in the glare. Down in the street the barrel-organ still churned its metallic music. She lay down on the bed, cooled her flushed face against a linen pillow, and re-read the letter she had just received. Tears began to run down her cheeks. It seemed that because long ago they had shared that fine brief flower of happiness, they were condemned to circle mothlike round each other for ever, lost souls that could bring themselves only deeper disaster.

Two nights later they met in Regent Street. The heat still held, and in the trough between the tall buildings there were little eddies of dust and blown paper.

"How's yourself?" said his rustic voice, half a tone too high.

He was dressed in a suit that exaggerated the breadth of his shoulders, with a coster handkerchief round his neck. Above the wide shoulders his head perched, she thought, like an apple on a pedestal.

"Your head looks too small," she said aloud, staring as it were past him into the emotion he caused her, and feeling at once as impersonal and as agonized as though he were the telegraph boy delivering an orange envelope which held the answer to all her future destiny.

He guffawed. "Come on, let's go into the Café Royal."

Presently they were sitting side by side on the red plush seat with two tall glasses of Pilsener standing before them upon little rubber mats on the marble table. A stout man beside them got up and prepared to go. He looked as though he was going to cry, but they saw it was only the contraction of his face as he pulled on his tight wash-leather gloves.

"Well?" enquired Francis.

"Well?" she retaliated. There was a slight pause. "Wouldn't it be curious if we had nothing to say to each other after all?"

He began to talk of the months he had spent abroad in a little seaboard town. "Oh, my dear, it was marvelous—the coast littered with white villas like paper-bags after a picnic; the color, the feathery palms, the smell of everything. Coffee-roasters at the street corners; little dark men in blue trousers mending nets on mattresses along the front. And the way they fish: astonishing! D'ye know, they go about the bay at night in little boats fitted with electric light—a great powerful glare just above their heads—and the light attracts the fish. The men have a long trident affair, and when the fish come up, hypnotized by the light, they simply spear 'em through. I went out with 'em once or twice; it's an amazing experience."

A silence followed; it was as though strings long muted were tautening up to be played upon once more.

"When can I come and see you?" he said at last, very low.

She flushed, unable to speak.

"It's no good pretending we can just be calm and friendly," he continued, leaning caressively towards her. "You know the moment we see each other we want to be lovers again. I can think of nothing else the moment I see you; I've never felt like this about any other woman."

An echo stirred, and she found her voice in anger. "The last person you said that about was your wife," and she picked up the tall glass with shaking wrist. "You were unfaithful to me with Sikey; you're unfaithful to her with me. I loved you beyond everything—" She bit her lip. "But what's the use of it all now? Let us be friends—friends as much as you like. But stick to your wife; it's the only thing you can do."

He moved his clever little hands, shrugged his shoulders. "Impossible. One gets bored with the same woman; one needs variety. I told her, you know, that I'd been unfaithful with you while she was away. Three times, I said. Somehow I couldn't tell her the whole truth. But as for Sikey, I didn't start with her till after you'd left me."

His gaze strayed to a neighboring table, where a massive lady miscellaneously adorned with pearl stud earrings, an ivory bracelet, a necklace of amber beads, a ring of ancient Florentine design, and a drooping red shawl coarsely knitted, was discoursing to a meek little man so much smaller than herself that he looked like a parasite as he sat enveloped under her shoulder. "Yes," she said, wagging a censorious head, "I know it for a fact, he's had a leezong with her for over two years."

"You're incredible," said Valentine fiercely. "You know perfectly well that the Sikey affair was one of the reasons why I went away."

"Oh, no, oh, no," he persisted. "I couldn't be mistaken in a thing like that. You've forgotten; you've got it wrong."

Her heart beat fast with anger, but she was silent, wondering at the ingenuity of his self-deceptions. It was apparently a necessary illusion of his being that he should never be in the wrong; his mind was pervaded with a picture of the enchanting, the irresistible, the fatal, and yet at the same moment the loyal, the fastidious and honorable Francis Merryweather; the truth was merely so much raw material that had to be cut and snipped about until it conformed to his own self-love. She looked again at those bright dark eyes, the beautifully modeled neck rising from the folds of the coster's scarf, and anger ebbed away into despair. How bitterly she hated the thing he was, how desperately loved the thing she had once thought him. It was the old trick, of course: *"The starres be hid that led me to this pain."* Almost she could have loved this pitiable relic as the hint, the echo, the ghost of that past delusion. Every second she spent with him, recognizing the discrepancy between him and the man she had loved, racked her with torment.

"Well, what does all that matter now?" said those just too high tones in her ear. "I've never gone on wanting any one as I want you. You'll come back to the bungalow? Lord, I wish we could be together tonight."

The massive lady opposite was stroking the hand of her timid little companion and fanning herself with an evening newspaper. Her voice came clearly across the space between.

"And mind you, I don't wonder she left him, I don't wonder at all. He called her everything he could lay his tongue to. Bitch and whore he called her, and what she never was she wasn't going to be named."

Valentine stared before her, the clean bitter taste of the Pilsener still on her lips. The empty glasses were foamed with rings like the divisions on a medicine beaker; two cigarettes were dwindling in the white china ashtray that reminded her of a soap-dish with its center raised in ridges. Everything was meaningless; the wavy wooden molding round the balcony; the half-buckets above it, bound in brass and sustaining crucified palm and fern; the wavy tasseled metal that gave a senseless decoration to the doors.

"You know quite well we can't stop being lovers," insisted Francis.

There was a roll of thunder in the air: the overpowering heat was breaking up in a storm.

"I must go," said Valentine, gathering up her things. "It's no use, Francis. I'm not in love with you any more."

He looked at her, sulky and incredulous, yet more like her old lover of Heron Hill than she had ever seen him since. In a panic she felt that if he looked like that one moment longer she would give way and commit herself to a new cycle of misery and despair.

"I don't love you," she repeated, convincing herself. "It's over."

They went out past a fat naked arm, a pipe, a number of bald and polished heads, three copper pendulums of a clock, a caged cashier. Impressions isolated themselves as in a fever or before a fainting-fit. He followed her out to the door. People were crowding the entrance, out of the storm. Lightning gashed the sky above Regent Street. Rain had already begun to fall, for some of the women's satin slippers were spattered with mud. They stood within the doors, hesitating. A clap of thunder burst above their heads, and a few minutes later a flood of tropical rain sheeted the streets.

Valentine put out her hand. "Be friends with me, Francis. Let the other thing go. You know there's no love between us."

"You're much more moral than you were," he taunted.

They watched in silence at the entrance. The wet road shone like silver; raindrops fell with such fury that they bounced back again from the pavement. Tears ran down the gleaming shop fronts. The air was cooling moment by moment, relaxing the tension of the drought. Out into the storm dashed the commissionaire with a large green umbrella; he opened the door of a saloon car which had just stopped. A silken leg appeared in the half-light; pearls and tulle and a white fur; a glossy black shoe and a monocle. Stately, he ushered them in under the umbrella.

"Good-by. We'll write sometimes?" said the young woman at last.

"Surely," responded Francis, ill-humoredly. His face was heavy and sullen, dominated by the beakish nose. Vividly she realized that she had never existed for him except as a tribute or an affront to his vanity; that his world was lit or darkened entirely by the changing light of his self-esteem.

"Let us be friends," she said again mechanically. For a moment they stood speechless. Then he laid a hand on her arm; his dark eyes took on their wooing look once more. Dismayed at the sudden war within her and her knowledge of the complete and shameful failure they had made, she turned abruptly and ran out into the storm.

* * * * *

Jane came into the dining-room of the flat as though she were a bloodhound on the trail, and looked suspiciously from Valentine to Sikey. There was a quiver, a vibration, to be picked up from the air, but what it meant she did not know. Sikey was peeling an apple, Valentine shuffled the leaves of a newspaper. Neither of them looked up at her entrance.

"What's the matter? You both look as though you were —burning up," she said, puzzled.

Sikey's dark head lifted. How brilliant the girl was this morning; her hair, her eyes, her very skin seemed to give off light. "The witch," thought Jane. "She's calling a lover into existence."

"I had a pain nearly all yesterday," observed Valentine. "And I've got a pain now."

Jane felt her forehead, and noticed that a spot of red like those on the faces of Dutch dolls glowed on either cheek.

"Darling, you're awfully hot. I don't think you're a bit well. Stay at home this morning, won't you? If you feel better you can come in after lunch."

"That's a very good plan, Jane." Valentine gave a shiver and sat up, talking feverishly. "You know, it's really very odd what a pain I've got. Do you think I'm going to be ill? I thought in the night that people get themselves into their illnesses. It's their own fault; when they don't want to be responsible for their own lives a minute longer then they just get ill. Yesterday I saw a hanging sign outside a chop-house: *All food, no music.* I thought how stupid it was, because music makes you hungrier than anything else in the world." Again she shivered violently.

The other two exchanged glances.

"Do go back to bed, Val," advised Sikey. She pushed aside the coil of apple-peeling and lit a cigarette.

"Well, I will," said Valentine unexpectedly.

When Sikey came up half an hour later she was sitting on the floor and tearing up letters; a pile of pale blue quarto sheets covered with a clerk's neat but featureless hand lay beside her.

"Not in bed, then?" enquired Sikey, watching the feverish movements of destruction.

"They're done with—it's all done with." Valentine ran her finger through the pile that was still intact. "You know, they're frightfully over-written; I never noticed it at the time. *'You lie on my heart like a golden cloud; keep me in that heaven with you. . . . My thoughts of you sparkle like the stars, but they are just as dumb and without you I am just as lonely. . . . I shall be your lover until you cease to know me, and I shall love you, never fear, though no longer your lover.'* Isn't it curious, no one can write of their own emotions without becoming a liar? And now what's left of it all?"

She sat back on her heels and stared wildly at Sikey, pushing back the hair that drooped over her flaming cheeks.

"If I could have kept only a moment of that first winter to remember, before I knew what he was. But you know, all that has happened since has taken every scrap of reality from our early time together; it's no more real now than a dream when you're awake and dressing and hurrying to the office. And yet the office is only a means towards life and the dream seemed like life itself. I've been a bloody fool, Sikey."

"Well, what about me?" suggested the other girl. She dropped down on the rug beside the corpse of Merryweather's love letters; an occasional word like a dismembered limb—"love," "meet," "yesterday"—caught her eye. "Suppose my people weren't safely in India; suppose I hadn't long ago scandalized all my maiden aunts and carved out my own stubborn way, it would have been fun to have an illegitimate child in the family circle, wouldn't it?"

"Ah, but you weren't in love, so you couldn't be really damaged," cried Valentine. "To give a rubbishy person the power to do such injury as I gave Francis—there's the folly. Besides, how unattractive suffering makes women; unattractive to themselves as well as to others. How I hate this ravaged person Valentine Spens who destroys my future. How I'd love to be like you; or, better still, like Francis himself—free and quite callous, an animal that life can't touch. There are times when I hate the spirit, gnawing, wearing one down, digging pits in the flesh."

Again a fit of shivering seized her and she began to talk more excitedly.

"I suppose this is the end of most love-stories—to have gone through hell, wasted years of one's life, spoilt one's youth, wanted to die, been a burden to one's friends and a torment to oneself—and what for? For some shoddy little man one doesn't even respect, with whom one has nothing in common, who isn't, in fact, one's own sort."

She tore the last few letters into small pieces as though to point her words, got to her feet, and swayed against the chest of drawers.

"You know, I believe I must be a bit ill after all. This pain was only a sort of ache in the night, but now it's like a knife." Laughter overcame her. "But a dull knife; a fish-knife."

"Get into bed at once," said Sikey in concern.

Towards evening she was sick and they sent for the nearest doctor. He turned out to be a brisk commonplace little man with a blue chin and a large contempt for pains in general and the pains of females in particular, for Valentine had annoyed him by being vague about her own and finally declaring that she thought it must have gone.

"My dear young lady, if you'd had a tenth of my experience you would know that all women who haven't a pain in their back have a pain in their side. She's eaten something to disagree with her. Keep her in bed and I'll send her round some medicine, and look in again in the morning."

He blew his nose, patted Jane on the shoulder, and bustled off.

In the night the shivering fits began again. Valentine held on to the bed but it seemed to her that it rocked the more wildly and would not keep still. Again and again she was sick.

"But that's not surprising," she thought, clinging desperately to the patches of sanity that still appeared in her mind. "Not surprising, with a drunken bed like this. I hope the doctor didn't notice how drunk it was. Of course he's a fool. That blue chin."

She clasped her hands on her breast and tried to lie still; that shaking swaying bed would wake up the household in a minute. Presently her thumbs felt as though they had grown to a monstrous size; they lay heavy as weights on her body. In alarm she snapped on the light and looked at them. How odd. Of course they could not be the same;

they belonged to somebody else now. Round the room her eyes wandered, searching for some familiar thing by which to steady her senses. The curtain was moving at the window and its movement threatened evil. A glint of moonlight fell on the glass bowl of powder on the dressing-table and turned it into a bubble. Moonlight . . . moonlight . . . "*moonlight like a big white butterfly*." But her thoughts doubled and produced the image of a cloud of butterflies lit by the moon, and though she tried to beat them off and hold to the moon alone they swarmed about her; their wings were soft and filthy to the touch. Every thought evoked evil. In fear she switched out the light and closed her eyes. Nothingness . . . darkness . . . space is dark. In the dark there is nothing. Dark can be no more than itself; nothingness can produce nothing. It was no use: she could not stop the images in her mind; they began single and innocent, but in a moment of time they had swelled out into complexity and loathsomeness. A rope passed up and down in front of her eyes, with a light blue sky behind it. Its braids were thick and coarse; they bulged as they twisted into one another; she could see the frayed strands of its outline against that sickening blueness, and that too was revolting beyond all speech. Horrified, she pressed her face into the pillow, trying to deaden the senses that projected their ceaseless flow of hideous idea. For a second or so the visual stream stopped, but her ears gave her the buzzing of low forms of life active in her blood, which terminated now and again in a high whine somewhere up in the ceiling. There was a diabolic loosening of the selves within her; if they were split and rent much more she felt that she would die. She fancied one of them had screamed; another listened in fear for footsteps; another assured her that she had made no sound. With a violent effort she tried to raise her voice and call for help, but not a sound escaped her. There was no pain in *that thing* now (she told herself, in strange dissociation from her body) but a mental anguish so frightful that it would have been a relief to link it up with some physical organ. She rocked to and fro, moaning in her bed, aware of chaos in all her blood. Morning began to whiten on the walls. There were noises. But what noises could they be? Here a door and there a footstep; in a distant yard somebody was shaking cinders through a sieve. Presently there was the jangle of milk bottles and the sour light of a London morning. A figure stood beside the bed. It shifted, doubled, and broke into others, which disappeared as in a ballet, leaving one alone.

There was a cool touch on her brow and her hot wrists.

"Darling, you're going into hospital. You've got a septic appendix. Do you understand?" said Jane's voice.

* * * * *

"My dear fellow, I had no idea, no idea at all." Robert Blair walked up and down the familiar furnished hall in distress, partly because he was burning to talk about the excavations at Nemi and Herculaneum—he was just back from a stifling month in Rome and Naples—and partly in genuine anxiety for his friend. Humphrey having opened the floodgates of his confidence first to his solicitor and then to his family, was now prepared to talk over his predicament with any one who would listen. But he had an uneasy feeling even while he spoke that there was a real issue which he left untouched. Life alone he found empty and meaningless, but when his mother or sister offered to come and keep house for him he felt obliged to give them an irritable refusal, knowing that he could not face that warfare of endless petty scratches which broke out whenever two members of the Spens family were jostled together under one roof. He wondered whether, free once more, he might not marry again. But the two alternatives—the solitary life or the married life—appalled him as a death in the desert or a death by drowning.

"Yes, she's deceived me pretty constantly for years," he said, folding his long hands. "But it's only recently that I got evidence enough to divorce her. One of her"—he coughed slightly—"lovers was a rather common little man called Merryweather; he's coining money now, I believe, as a furniture-maker or something of that sort. I'd have divorced her long ago over him—but the law has a queer idea of proof. I should have thought a letter declaring that she was going to live with him—but no, that wasn't enough."

Suddenly he got up and began to rove about the room. Blair stood in the open doorway and eyed him helplessly.

"I say, is it really as bad as all that? I always thought you—er—admirably suited."

"My God, Blair, you can thank your stars you've never married. Women—women—they're low, they're despicable, they drag every decent sentiment down into the dirt. Every man of genius has always hated them; look at Tolstoy. When they were kept in their place it wasn't so bad, but nowadays, this beastly morbid sex madness they're all possessed by—bah, they revolt me."

Leaning against the lintel, Blair looked out at the brick path that ran between the autumn borders full of the dull fat autumn flowers like sponges: aster, dahlia, and chrysanthemum. A spark of unreasonable irritation gathered in his soul. Why couldn't people be just simple and intelligent? Why couldn't wives stay contentedly with their husbands, and husbands keep their wives? This sort of thing was all so unnecessary. He wanted to tell Humphrey about the fat little stockbroker in the solar toupee whom he had met at Naples.

"Yes, whenever I come to Naples I always take a trip to Pompay; never miss going to Pompay."

"Bombay?" he had asked, momentarily puzzled.

"No, no, no, Pompay, Pompay."

And his own exquisite titillation as he had replied courteously, "My dear sir, how very right and fitting. Pompeii was, as of course you know, the Roman Brighton."

But observing Humphrey's white furious face he postponed the telling. Something in his look tonight reminded Blair vividly of the elder Mrs. Spens as he had seen her on her rare visits to Radnor End, pouncing on the servant, scolding Valentine, finding fault with her son. A torrent of nagging, he knew, wears down the hardest stone.

"She has a lot to answer for, the old lady," thought Blair.

* * * * *

There was a large ventilator set in the top of the wall. Valentine imagined that through it came all the light and air there was. In that case, the room for all its ordinary bedroom furniture must be a dungeon. There would be mud on the floor and probably rats. All was still; above her aching body the bedclothes felt clean and cool. She opened her eyes wider, trying to banish fantasy and call in common sense to reënforce their vision. She was in a small square room with green walls rounded at the corners, and a white frieze which curved up into the ceiling. Above her bed was the electric light with its worn red cord and pendulum; the central heating-pipes ran up to a rusty wheel in one corner, and beside the radiator in the window stood two cane chairs with seats that sagged like hammocks. There was a washstand with a green fluted curtain let in at the back, a dressing-chest with a green cover; at her elbow on a glass-topped table was a tumbler of water, cooled by a dagger of ice that chinked against the sides. But the dungeon idea was not to be driven off; it came sneaking back; at the foot of the cool sheets the rats were nibbling. She began to toss about, and with a sudden notion that it was stifling her, she took off her wedding-ring and laid it on the table beside the glass.

Two nurses came in carrying enamel trays, bottles, and a mackintosh sheet. They painted her with iodine until she had a section of copper-colored Indian about her middle, cased her legs in long stockings of pink wool, and put her into a flannel coat. Now she was ready for the operating room.

"Three persons," she said, giggling, as she caught sight of the white sleeve against her coppery body and noticed the absurd pink feet that finished it off.

The trolley ran crooked, bumping into the walls of the corridor. Swing-doors were propped open; within was another room full of steam through which people moved about in dark rubber gloves. A firm chin hovered above a firm hand that sounded her with a stethoscope. Something dark was laid over her face.

"Hold my hand if you like," said a nurse briskly. Warm clammy fingers clasped her own.

"Now breathe. Breathe *now,*" said another voice, calm with authority.

"Do be sure I'm off," Valentine heard herself say in indignant tones, and then the conscious life she knew flickered like a candle and blew out.

It seemed that a century or so of darkness elapsed between the blowing out of surface knowledge and the kindling of that new perception she was inclined to call the underground sight, which began like an unknown eye and opened somewhere in the middle of her being. This sense as of an inward waking assured her that she had gone back both in space and time to the first-of-all; she was deep among the roots and beginnings of life. And as she felt through this new deep-delving sense the struggle, the crucifixion of will, with which organic life took form, it seemed to her that she was on the point of understanding the secret core of all knowledge, and that it was necessary beyond all things to achieve this understanding, since for this one hour she was supporting the travail of creation; and *the quarrel man has to the stars* was swept away in humility and shame that she had not trained herself long ago to distinguish between real and false, necessary and unnecessary, in a way that would have helped her now. Dimly she discerned an identity of principle in the building up of cells, of atoms, in the whole chain of life on earth; she knew the disciplined order in which like must follow, and unite with, that which is not altogether like but faintly dissimilar, patiently strengthening the chain, patiently supporting the growth of differences, until by slow degrees an opposite is evolved. She saw the self-will with which each cell, each atom, each separate form of life, longs to embrace its utter likeness or its very self, and how this union, with its intoxication of delight that turns at last to agony, contravenes the purpose behind the universe and renders sterile its own work in creation. "I understand everything now," she thought joyfully, perceiving that only by renouncing the restless animal will of matter could the deeper unity be achieved. But the vision changed and deepened, fold upon fold, until it grew impenetrable to her sense. "No, I understand nothing," she admitted at last in shame. Night came down once more and the labor to understand was over. Darkness gathered over that new mode of knowing; slowly the perceptive eye closed. Common consciousness returned slowly in waves, like circulation to a dead limb. She could not believe she was not dead and beginning some new form of existence.

"Where am I?" she asked.

There was a laugh that sounded very solid within the green walls. People were moving about. "Isn't it funny how they never know where they are?"

She sank back into unconsciousness, and rose again despairingly.

"Will no one tell me which world I'm in?"

A round pink face under a white cap came and peered into hers.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Nurse Hanney. And you're in a very material world, my dear."

"I remember your golden curls," said Valentine dreamily, and went under again. Presently a sensation like a draught made itself felt on her left hand.

"Where's my ring?"

It was slipped on to her fourth finger.

"I suppose that *is* my ring? It feels very queer." She looked round, trying to balance herself mentally by regarding the green walls, the rusty wheel, the traveling-clock which some one had put on her table and which pointed to half-past nine.

"Well, it isn't mine," said Nurse Hanney, with a laugh.

Once more she rocked back into nescience and it seemed an eternity before consciousness glimmered again in her disordered brain. For a time she could not open her eyes. "How marvelous life is," she thought drunkenly. The dark room swayed about her. "I never supposed I should know what it was to be born with my eyes sealed up like a kitten." But at last she forced her lids apart and looked at the clock. It still stood at half-past nine.

"That clock's—stopped," she said laboriously.

Nurse Hanney picked it up and held it to her ear. "No, dear, it's going all right."

Suddenly she became aware that she was propped upright in bed in a position of great discomfort; there was an unpleasant smell in the room; her head lolled about; she was hot and devoured with thirst, and she was smothered in an immense white coat that reminded her of an umpire's. She tried weakly to push off the clothes and to lie down, but at once a swarm of people gathered about her, making foolish remarks.

"She's very cold still. Another hot bottle, I think, Nurse. Now, would you like something to drink?"

It was sweet lemonade and she found it disgusting. "Couldn't I have cold water, or something sour?"

But at intervals the sweet lemonade was brought again. She had a dim sense that an experience of the very first importance had befallen her, that the normal ways of consciousness were only the scratchings of a surface which concealed profounder modes of being, and she felt angry with the nurses for distracting her attention from it by giving her a drink which they knew was nauseating, and by making her sit up in this ridiculous position. She tried to recall the experience that had come to her under the anesthetic, but now all she could think of was that tumbler of water with the dagger of ice in it which had been beside her bed before the operation. She remembered the long streaks in the ice that looked like needles, steely cool, and felt crosser than ever.

* * * * *

The new wardmaid, a forlorn mouse-colored scrap of humanity with downtrodden heels, had come in with a duster and a tin of polish in her hand, and set to work polishing the brass. She breathed hard, rubbing up the handle of the door and the window-fittings.

"Do I have to clean the lamp, miss?"

Valentine stirred herself from the childish drowse in which she spent her time. It was her third and last week in hospital; she wondered idly what was going to happen next, but she was too sleepy to care.

"The lamp? *I* dunno."

The wardmaid stood meekly, pleating her apron. "They never told me if I had to clean the lamp."

"Well, I shouldn't; it's Saturday," said the drowsy voice from the pillows. It had a reassuring sound; it was not so efficient and brisk and condemnatory as the voices she had been hearing lately. As she polished the electric light switch she began to talk.

"I useter work in private houses, you know, miss; oh, it was nice. I always had a room to meself. You could read or write or do your sewing, as nice and quiet as a lady. But here, you know, miss, it's too bad, that's what it is—we never has a room to ourselves. And with six or seven noisy girls all in one room, why, you can't hardly think for the humdrum."

"Yes, that's horrid, never being alone," murmured Valentine sympathetically.

"That it is," agreed the wardmaid, gathering up her things. "Oh, miss, there are times I could a'most cry for the want to be more private-like."

The door-handle rattled; the Sister on duty pounced in, and the wardmaid whisked out.

"Some one to see you, Mrs. Spens. Though I must say it's rather early for callers, you know; it's hardly visiting hours yet."

Her prim flat little figure, that looked as though it must be pressed every night between two boards, moved hastily round the room, as she straightened the green cover, moved the flowers, and picked up the book Valentine had laid down.

"What's the book? Dear me, *Dialogues of the Buddha*." She rhymed the word with rudder. "Oh, that's very interesting. I'm an agnostic myself—of course I didn't give up going to church until Mother died—but I always think there's more in reincarnation than in the Church of England. Well, I'll tell your visitor that he may come in."

A little ferrety face peered round the door. "Excuse me, they told me—it *is* Mrs. Spens? You're quite sure it's Mrs. Humphrey Spens?"

The girl roused herself. "Yes. I am Mrs. Humphrey Spens."

"Then," said the possessor of the ferret face with more formality, as he advanced into the room, "it is my duty to give you this."

He gave a large document into Valentine's hands, and left, covered with confusion.

"Well," thought she sleepily, "well. That's an odd sort of present." She went to sleep again twice before she could summon up the energy to open it, so large and long and formidable it looked. But at last she turned lazily over the pages.

"Make answer to the charges in this Petition. . . . *Wherefore your Petitioner prays* . . . hearing the said charges proved and pronounce judgment, your absence notwithstanding." . . . Why, it means divorce. Well, that's a good thing; make a clean sweep; tidy everything up at once.

Now the document seemed to her exquisitely comical. She savored its phrases like a dish she had not tasted before.

"Your Petitioner lived and cohabited with his said wife . . . the said Valentine Spens committed adultery with the said Karl Schmidt . . . Wherefore your Petitioner prays that the marriage may be dissolved."

In the afternoon Jane came.

"Well, how are you?"

Valentine blinked at the window. Above the sash there was a small circular window like a porthole, covered with glazed blue cotton; it had become so familiar to her that she would be sorry to leave it.

"Better, Jane. All the poison has drained away. And hospital life just suits me. I could lie here for ever and watch people popping in and out. But you know, I've no idea who put me in a private ward or how I'm going to pay for it all."

A little embarrassed, Jane pulled off her gloves and rolled them into a ball. "As a matter of fact, I am."

"You?"

The nunlike little face colored slightly, turned towards the window, and looked out at the sunny October air full of the last leaves eddying from the plane-trees in the square below.

"You see, Valentine, I didn't want to tell you while you were so ill. Richard died a fortnight ago. And—I know this will surprise you—I married him last June. It wasn't an ordinary marriage, so we couldn't tell people and have to face presents and congratulations, when he might die at any moment. But he wanted to leave Clare in my hands, and after we had thought it over the best way seemed for me to be his legal wife. Everything's left to me. Clare's at the flat now, and as soon as you're well enough to be moved I'm going to take you all down to Dewberry Common."

"All?" said Valentine faintly. She felt dazed. Jane Napier become Jane Lacey; a virgin, a widow, a step-mother; it was all too bewildering.

Jane smiled. "Yes, I'm going to take charge of the baby as well. Sikey has just been offered a job; going round the soap towns and the cocoa towns—industrial fatigue tests or something—I'm rather vague about it. But it's a very good job and she's frightfully keen to go."

"This is a cleaner sweep than I supposed," murmured the invalid. "Let's take the wardmaid with us too and give her a room to herself."

"Well, what about you, darling?" said Jane after a time. "What about—Francis?" The name came out timidly. "Are you free of that miserable obsession yet?"

"Free? Yes, as free as air." She stretched herself like a sleepy animal among the pillows. It was possible now to walk back through the past as one might walk through the blackened shell of a house gutted by fire; all was dead, safe, moveless. Stir the heaps of ashes, pry into every corner of the wrecked building; all is dead, dead, dead; not even a flicker of those destroying flames is alive now.

"I wrote once, after my operation," she added. "I wanted him to know it was all quite different and I wasn't bitter any more. But he didn't answer. I suppose he didn't believe in my letter. And perhaps he was right: injuries are never forgiven, they're only forgotten when the pain stops."

"I should think it was less your letter than the blow to his vanity that he couldn't forgive," said Jane shrewdly.

Valentine closed her eyes. "What's there to say? Nothing. You build a great wall of explanation and meanwhile life has popped out through the chinks."

She felt that her whole mode of being was changed: the dark side of her life, the sensual shadow, had lifted, and a clearer, simpler existence was about to begin, into which she was reborn with spent youth but with some of the humility and fatalism of the truly mature. For the present she must be content to wait in patience and possess her own soul. By no miracle could she suddenly become as resolute as Sikey or as selfless as Jane; she knew very well that at times she would still behave with folly, willfulness and egoism. But slowly, a pittance at a time, she would learn wisdom.

Dreamily she smiled at Jane, and they both looked out of the window in silence. Out in the square the plane-trees were mottled, casting their skins. Relieved of the burden of ruined leaf, they were ready for the long sleep of winter.

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